

Mass Effect: The New Journey

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Summary: During a Joint Deployment, the UNSC Infinity and Her Sangheili allies are suddenly thrown into a new Galaxy, and end up near Charon before the Systems Alliance discovers the Charon Relay. Alliances are forged and how will the galaxy react to an aggressive humanity that not only doesn't use Mass Effect technology, but will not let anyone stand in their way of expansion? AU PreME1

1. The Admiral's Offer

__Mass Effect: The New Journey**__**

__Chapter One: __A New Past

I know what you're thinking. "Another Mass Effect/Halo Crossover"? Yes, I know, I know, but this is an idea that has been in my head for the last couple of days and won't go away. Also, since I refuse to work on three stories simultaneously, this will also test the waters of what YOU the reader want. I'm working on chapter four of Paradigm Shifts as well as my Naruto fic. The Naruto one is staying, no questions asked, but these two are up in the air. I'll look at reader feedback to see which ones you all like the most.

By the way, I'm taking a LOT of liberties with Halo canon (who's alive, who's not, etc) for the sole purpose of rule of cool. So if someone's alive here, who should be canon, the answer to why they are alive is simple: Because **__**it's fucking awesome,**__** that's why.

That being said, let's get this show on the road and see how well I do!

Full Summary: During a joint patrol/deployment, the UNSC and her Sangheili allies are transported to aruins. After having no choice, the two embark on an alliance with the Systems Alliance. How will the galaxy react to an aggressive and domineering humanity who comes aboard with technology that's, quite literally, out of this

universe?

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****UNSC Infinity, Slipspace, in-route to the Perseus Arm****

****April 15****th****, 2570****

Hearing a beeping noise, Admiral Thomas Lasky groggily awakened from his slumber. The alarm clock was annoying, yes, but it sure did its job as advertised. Reaching up, he smashed the snooze button in aggravation, and turned on his side to get some extra shut-eye, in defiance.

"You know, Admiral, the clock was set for a reason," came the voice all too familiar with the UNSC naval officer.

Lasky groaned, not really in the mood. That was a very nice slumber he was awakened from. "Roland...piss off," Lasky replied, not really caring at that particular moment. He wasn't around his subordinates, and Roland knew him very well, so there was no need for decorum.

"Admiral, I would have you know that we'll be in the Perseus Arm within the next hour or so," he said a matter-of-factly. "I'd suggest you hurry and get dressed. Wouldn't want to show up on a joint deployment with the Arbiter looking like a dirtbag." He always did enjoy Marine vernacular.

Sighing, Lasky forced himself out of his bed and craned his neck and stretched his upper body muscles. He immediately went to the bathroom to take a quick shower, shave, and do any other miscellaneous hygienic needs to appear as professional as possible.

"How's **Infinity**, Roland?" Lasky asked stepping back into his quarters drying his face of shaving cream. He had to admit; he did feel a hell of lot more energetic after cleaning up.

"Green as always, sir," the AI remarked, with a bit of disinterest, almost as if the inquiry was preposterous in his mind.

Lasky smirked and decided to tease the AI for his own amusement. "Sure? Might have missed a diagnostic somewhere."

"Please," Roland scoffed. "Admiral, I've been on this ship and working with you for thirteen years, I know this ship better than practically any of you humans and given my capability upgrades after Requiem, you damn well sure I know this ship is green." If this were ten years ago, Roland would've been dead from rampancy six years ago, five if he was lucky. But due to data found on Requiem by the Master Chief, the UNSC was not only able to repair and save Cortana in time, but also able to give new upgrades to every existing Smart AI. Unfortunately, the data algorithms and processes were far too complex for the matrixes of 'dumb' AI and as such, their life span was virtually the same as it had always been. It didn't matter to UNSC

brass though. If they were being completely honest with themselves, the value of the prolonged life span of a smart AI outweighed a hundred dumb ones.

Lasky finished putting on his dress blues. "So I see your point." Grabbing a cup from the cabinet, he poured himself some hot chocolate, preferring it to coffee or a latte. The latter brewed beverages did nothing for him, and yet, strangely, hot cocoa did. Drinking some, he allowed the taste to stay on his lips before closing the lid and walking out. The doors locked automatically.

Strolling down the hallways toward the exit, coincidentally, he ran into his old friend and confidant, Sarah Palmer. The SPARTAN-IV was fully armored in her MJOLNIR GEN-3 armor, without her helmet. New generation MJOLNIR armor had helmets built in and could retract inside the suit at the will of the Spartan using it, a process eerily similar to the Didact. All it would take was a simply mental command, and Palmer could be fully ready for battle within two seconds. "Look at you, Admiral, I see you didn't feel like getting up as much as I didn't," she noted with hints of amusement.

"Don't start with me, Captain. I was having some great dreams," he remarked, good naturedly, as they passed and saluted several subordinates on their way to the elevator to **Infinity**'s bridge.

Palmer laughed, "Like what? Dreaming that you'll one day beat me in war games on the S-deck?"

Lasky scoffed, "I'm a pilot and a ship officer, Captain. Ground Ops is your forte, not mine, though I'm certainly capable if push comes to shove." Protecting Dr. Halsey from a Promethean Knight more than a decade ago immediately came to mind.

Palmer shook her head and didn't comment any further as they both stepped into the elevator. Roland had already preprogrammed it to take them to the bridge.

"Tom," Palmer started, using first names, now that they were alone. "I know this is a joint deployment, but I just can't get this nagging feeling in the back of my head, that something's just...off."

Lasky frowned. "Look, Sarah...we've been allies for almost twenty years. The Arbiter has proven time and time again he's upholding his vow to make up for the mistakes that were made during the war. I think it's time to bury the hatchet."

She shook her head. "No, sir, it's not the squid heads. I trust themâ€"pft, never thought I'd say that—I'm just talking about this whole thing. Just...I don't know. I understand that this deployment was intended to be long-term, but the brass overstocked Infinity to ludicrous levels," she told him, bluntly.

Lasky nodded in slight agreement. 'Overstocked' was probably a **colossal** understatement. The UNSC brass went above and beyond two weeks ago when **Infinity** and her escort fleet underwent massive software and hardware upgrades in the Ort Cloud shipyard. Literally, **every single computer** on the flagship was stripped out and replaced with the latest-and-greatest editions of hardware,

some of which, quite literally, came off the assembly line a few days before being shipped to **Infinity**. Sections of the ship that used to be for civilians were stripped and cut in half in total number and were replaced with additional barracks and hangars for combat personnel. Infinity's main hangar bay was filled to maximum capacity with Longswords, Sabres, Broadswords, and the brand-new Katana class fighter jets, along with hundreds of Pelican dropships. In some cases, the vehicles were spaced apart barely twenty-five feet from each other, the bare minimum by UNSC regulations. Land based vehicles were in a separate bay, but like their flying cousins, they were stocked to the brim too. Hundreds of Cougars, Warthogs, Generation-II Scorpion Tanks, Grizzlies, Cobras, Rhinos, with numerous upgrades in speed and firepower were added to the roster of Infinity's complement. To go along with this firepower, for the first time ever, three veteran battalions of ODST would serve onboard Humanity's flagship to assist in ground ops with the Marines and Spartans on-board. Like every other infantry division, they got some new personal toys as well, a "Christmas in April" as the Squad leaders dubbed it. The dozens of armories scattered throughout the ship were loaded with enough infantry weapons and ammo to last years, possibly more if they were rationed.

For the ship itself, the Huragok had upgraded its shielding system, adding a second layer and being able to recharge even quicker, and upgraded its sensor systems. Its four Series-8 MAC guns were now halfway in between the power it used to have, and the power of the new Ultra-Mac Orbital Defense Platforms, which replaced the Super-Macs ten years ago, en masse. While the Archer missiles were simply upgraded to provide more range, speed, and explosive yield, the Howler and Rapier pods were taken out entirely and were replaced with the new M-100 Jericho missile defense system. There were 750 Jericho Missile pods, with only three missiles per pod. Although, on the surface, it seemed like a ludicrously small amount, especially considering the importance of Infinity, what made Jericho missiles heads and shoulders above Howlers and Rapiers was the fact that when one missile fired, it separated halfway to its target into a hundred different missiles, increasing the explosive yield and killing power of the tertiary weapons tenfold.

Although very select individuals on the ship knew it, there existed three prototypes SUPERNOVA ISBMs (Interstellar Ballistic Missile), hidden deep within the bowels of the ship, guarded at all times by a SPARTAN-IV fireteam. These bombs were retrofitted with pinpoint accurate slipspace drives and the UNSC Infinity could, in theory, nuke a planet or star system from the other side of the galaxy thousands of light years away. They were covered in a special Forerunner-grade coating that made it virtually undetectable by conventional means. UNSC scientists knew of the only known weakness of the coating and that secret was Delta-8 classified. Any person who somehow learned of the secret and didn't have the proper clearance and need-to-know was executed. ONI was taking absolutely zero chances when it came to WMDs. Admiral Lasky needed the express unanimous consent of HIGHCOM to use the SUPERNOVA; otherwise, he'd be court martialed and sent to a high security UNSC prison for the rest of his natural life in the absolute best-case scenario. In the worst, and frankly more likely, scenario, his trial would be publicized all over UEG space and he'd be executed to make an example out of.

All in all, the UNSC had spent billions of cR upgrading both Infinity and her escort fleet, with the firepower and crew to take on

God himself. The process took two weeks, with over a hundred thousand persons, human, engineer, and, oddly enough, Sangheili (mostly for some heavy lifting), working tirelessly with very few breaks.

"I know, but we're exploring the other side of the galaxy as well as practicing war games along the way. At least we know command isn't taking any chances in case we run into trouble," Lasky argued.

"If you say so." The retort came out more dismissive than she intended, but it was too late now. She knew the admiral wouldn't take it personally.

They arrived at the bridge and stepped out of the elevator. "Admiral on deck!" Every single officer and enlisted personnel immediately stopped what they were doing to go to attention.

Lasky smiled a bit. He was at home. "As you were," he told them, and they went back to their duties not a moment later.

He and Palmer turned the corner and found an unexpected guest on the bridge: Commander John-117, leader of the Spartans on **Infinity**, and unquestionably the savior of humanity. MJOLNIR Mark IX covered him from head to toe, and although he could retract his helmet into his suit, he preferred to have it on outside of his quarters and around other Spartans. Although Palmer outranked him on a technicality, she always diverted ground ops leadership to him, his decades of experience invaluable.

"Well, you certainly were the last person I expected on my bridge," the UNSC flag officer noted.

"Cortana insisted," he tried to allay.

"And yet, at the end of the day, you still could've refused," Cortana quipped, her hologram appearing on the holotable. She looked better than ever, to the point where you wouldn't know she had almost died from Rampancy if you didn't know her history. "Honestly, Chief, you don't have to listen to all my suggestions." Even though John was an officer, old habits died hard, even for AI. He'd always be the "Chief" to her, or John when in private.

"Then you'd complain about me not taking your ideas into account," John retorted, staring at her.

Cortana tipped her head, conceding. "TouchÃ©."

"Come to see the fireworks, I take it commander?" Lasky asked the legendary super soldier.

"More or less."

"I see. Roland, how long until we reach the Perseus Arm and the rendezvous point with the Arbiter's fleet?"

Roland's avatar appeared on the other side of the table near Lasky. "Ten minutes, sir. The Fleet of Glorious Repentance should be waiting for us. They did leave a bit earlier than us."

"Glorious Repentance, huh? Not too shabby," Palmer had to admit to herself. Although the fleet was small numerically, it more than made

up for it in sheer firepower and the skill of the warriors that served in it. The Sangheili, Unggoy, and Mgalekgolo that served in the fleet more than lived up to their reputation, with some Sangheili Spec Ops Officers easily rivaling the SPARTAN-IIs, let alone the IIIs and IVs, on Infinity. When you allowed yourself to adapt to new ways of battle instead of the usual doctrine they had used for a millennium under the Prophets, it allowed for tremendous increases in skill and prowess. To say the UNSC felt blessed they didn't face them at their current level during the war thirty years ago was a putting it lightly.

The name wasn't for show either. The fleet was a symbolic representation of the sins of the Covenant and the need for a new step forward with human/separatist relations. Each and every single warrior in the fleet volunteered of their own free will to serve and repent for their deeds in the Human-Covenant war. Judging from some of the classified dossiers from ONI that Lasky was able to see pre-deployment, some of the individual Sangheili in the fleet from minor all the way to shipmaster were ****ferociously**** loyal to humanity as a whole. The irony was not lost to the Admiral.

"Indeed. We should expect nineteen ships when we arrive: Three CAS-Class Assault Carriers, seven CCS-Battle cruisers, and nine SDV corvettes. As you know already, Infinity's escort consists of three Marathon-class heavy cruisers, six-Halcyon class light cruisers, Infinity's ten Strident-class frigates, as well as twelve Paris-class frigates, all retrofitted and upgraded."

"Fifty-one ships?" Palmer whistled in awe. This fleet, with its combination of superior firepower and numbers, was probably strong enough to take down Reach if it really wanted too.

"We'll be exiting slipspace in approximately one minute, Admiral!" one of the technicians called out.

"Ready to get back into the fight, Chief?" Cortana teased.

"So long as you're not driving," John replied, humorously, with a wave of nostalgia washing through him. Although he wouldn't admit it, he was kind of anxious to fight alongside Thel again. The two had amazing battle chemistry during the final closing days of war. He was just as valuable of a teammate, if not more so, than Blue Team. Not that he'd ever tell Fred, Kelly, or Linda that.

"Exciting Slipspace in...three...two...one..."

Looking outside, the blackness of space was finally visible again as the near-six kilometer long vessel to John. On either side of Infinity were her escorts, the three Marathon-class cruisers taking point near the front of the flagship, the six Halcyon cruisers in the center and back, with twelve frigates scattered in various strategic places.

"All ships reporting green, Admiral," Roland informed him. Lasky nodded his head in acknowledgement. The entire fleet had jumped and were not even ten kilometers apart, a feat previously unheard of and reserved for Covenant ships. UNSC tech really had come a long way since the end of the war.

Up ahead was the Fleet of Glorious Repentance, waiting tranquilly

in perfect formation, for their human allies. The _Shadow of Intent_, the fleet's flagship, was dead center, coated in black, instead of silver, along with the rest of their ships. The cruisers were now cobalt blue and the other Assault Carriers, _the __**Steeple of Ascent**_ and _**Baptism of Fire**_, were colored a dark grey. The logic and reasoning behind the color scheme changes were that the Sangheili wanted to bury the legacy of the Covenant Empire as much as possible and so the Arbiter ordered all Separatist ships to be repainted in new colors to atone for their error in the Human-Covenant war. It was a small gesture, sure, but it spoke volumes in closing the gap of distrust in the long run. So far, it was proving to be working. Human-Sangheili relations were growing warmer with every month that passed by. By now, it was a forgone conclusion that their alliance would eventually result in unification under a single government.

"We're being hailed, Admiral," Roland reported stoically.

Lasky took a small swig of his hot chocolate and sat it in a cup holder. He was ready. "Patch 'em through, Roland."

In seconds, a holographic "television" appeared on the holotable and the image of Thel Vadam, Arbiter and de-facto leader of the Sangheili's image inside the rectangular hologram. He still wore the ceremonial armor that the Prophets had given him decades ago. However, even with its appearance, it had undergone massive upgrades, courtesy of UNSC scientists at Trevelyan as a show of good faith and a nod of thanks. After all, were it not for the Arbiter, Rtas would've glassed Earth eighteen years ago to prevent the Flood from spreading. The only armor in UEG space that remotely compared was MJOLNIR Mark IX, which, ironically enough, only had one wearer: John.

"Ah, Admiral Lasky, you finally show up. I was beginning to think you wouldn't show," the Arbiter joked, which was a bit strange coming from him.

Lasky smirked. "You know I wouldn't have missed this for the galaxy."

"So it seems," the Arbiter replied good-naturedly. "Are you all well stocked for this mission? It will be awhile before we return home."

Suppressing an amused scoff, the admiral replied, "Of course. We're at maximum capacity for literally, everything: ships, personnel, supplies, you name it."

The Arbiter gave a grin. His entire fleet was the same way. Stocked to the brim. "It seems Lord Hood doesn't take chances. This is good." He then noticed John. "It's good to see you again, Jo...Spartan."

"Likewise, Arbiter," the Spartan commander replied genuinely, glad Thel had caught himself in time. The two were on first name basis, but they preferred that to not be public knowledge. Lord knows that would cause more of a headache than what was needed.

"Arbiter, when can you have some of your Spec Ops to Infinity? Fireteams Crimson and Majestic have been looking for a rematch after

that last bout," Palmer inquired with a small and satisfied smirk on her face. She'd be lying if she didn't find the two SPARTAN-IV teams being thoroughly trounced in war games by the Sangheili Spec Ops team on Infinity's S-deck thoroughly comical. They were getting a bit too arrogant and it did serve as some humble pie that served cold. Unsurprisingly, Blue Team and NOBLE team had a far better win/loss ratio.

She saw the elite tap a few buttons on his console. "Done. Rtas will have a Phantom sent to Infinity within ten minutes."

Palmer nodded in thanks and dismissed herself from the bridge, eager to tell Majestic and Crimson to suit up.

"When they arrive, I'd like us to head out ASAP," Lasky suggested.

"Agreed, Admiral. I'll prep our teams for immediate deployment." With that the connection was cut off and the Arbiter's image vanished. Chief had touched Cortana's hologram and the AI was instantly in his suit. The UNSC officer raised an eyebrow.

"Something wrong, Commander?"

John simply walked passed him. "Majestic and Crimson aren't the only ones looking for a fight." He punched the elevator to take him to the S-deck.

With a shake of his head, Lasky sat in his chair enjoying his cocoa, going over some last minute diagnostics with Roland.

****UNSC **_**Infinity**_**, S-Deck ****

"So...what's it looking like, Kat?" Commander Carter-A259 asked Noble-Two. He was in dark blue MJOLNIR Mark VIII armor. It looked virtually the same as the Mark V he wore during the fall of Reach except it was a lot slimmer and lighter, and the internal upgrades were exceptionally more advanced.

"I count two Sangheili rangers, but I don't see anyone else," Kat replied, looking back at the leader of NOBLE team. Like the commander, her armor was the same, as well. In these times of piece the UNSC was finally able to convince her to replace her cybernetic arm with one that was flash cloned.

Carter hugged a nearby pillar and clenched his MA5E Hybrid Assault Rifle. He was a tactician, and a thinker, but this was proving to be a tough call for him. He could charge ahead and end this the old fashioned way in a zerg rush, but that came with a plethora of risks, along with going the opposite route in trying to sneak in. He decided to screw it and go for the former and made a move to leap into action before...

SIMULATION TERMINATED...****

SIMULATION TERMINATED...****

The environment they were in vanished and was transformed into a dull grey room, one of the many hybrid holographic/hard light training rooms on the S-deck.

"Well...that was anti-climatic," Kat said, annoyed.

"Agreed," Carter said as both SPARTAN-IIIs exited the training deck. They immediately strolled towards the tower that controlled the simulations to find Fireteam Majestic. They all went to attention and saluted the Commander, which was sharply returned. "I'm sure you all had a good reason for stopping our training?"

DeMarco, Majestic's commander, had spoken collectively for all of them. "Sorry, commander, orders from Admiral Lasky, all operations are to end immediately," he reported apologetically.

"It's fine," Carter replied, clearly not happy, but he'd get over it, eventually.

"I wouldn't say immediately," came the voice of Palmer, giving the team one of her rare smiles. "At ease, Spartans," she told them, sensing them tense up when she walked in. "I got good news, Majestic."

"Define "good" news, Captain, as that can mean anything to you," Thorne quipped, throwing the Captain a smirk.

"Well, as you know, we've already arrived in the Perseus Arm, and I managed to convince the Arbiter to send some Spec Ops Elites over here to train with us while the Admirals and Ship commanders play nicely upstairs."

Their looks were priceless she wouldn't lie. "Oh, hell yeah! Time for some payback, Majestic!" Hoya's enthusiasm was infectious and the Fireteam had full-blown shit eating grins.

"Well, gather Fireteam Crimson and get your asses to hangar bay 20 and meet the squidheads." The nickname for the Elites was now used more affectionately, than out of scorn. Christ, they were growing on her like a fungus. Majestic practically sprinted out of the tower.

"Think they got what it takes to beat 'em?"

"Not really sure to be honest, Captain," Kat replied. "We've been training them hard for the past six months, but Rtas' Spec Ops soldiers are some seriously tough bastards. Six and Commander-117 are the ones who consistently defeat them." If Captain Palmer didn't know any better, she could've sworn she picked up some mild resentment from Noble-Two. "But, then again, we don't know if they'll be facing the same operatives as before."

Palmer nodded. "All right, think NOBLE team is up for a few rounds too?"

Carter nodded. "Yes, ma'am. Jun, Emile, and Jorge shouldn't be too hard to find. Six...dunno where he is."

"Probably playing with the Air Force's new bird," Kat sardonically replied. Six loved flying almost as much as he liked fighting and for a Spartan that was saying something!

**UNSC Infinity, Hangar Bay 20**

Hangar Bay 20 was a minor side hangar located near the top of the Infinity. It only had two landing ports, one of which was currently unoccupied, to make room for the Sangheili that would soon be arriving.

"Okay, you've been acting like a kid early Christmas morning, Nathan. You haven't left that cockpit ever since we entered real space," Jorge commented in annoyance, moving a few crates with some Marines in the Hangar Bay.

Nathan-B312, otherwise known as Noble Six, turned his head to stare at the only SPARTAN-II among NOBLE Team. His emerald green eyes traced amusement. "Oh, come on, Jorge, you can't tell me you can't wait to see what this thing can really do! I thought the Sabre was a badass plane, but..." Nathan whistled for emphasis. He was sitting in the cockpit of the YSS-2000, otherwise known as the "Katana". It was the newest space superiority fighter in the UNSC's inventory, having just completed testing and coming into service just a little under a year ago.

Aesthetically, it reminded Nathan of the SR-71 Blackbird developed by the United States of America, some six-hundred-plus years ago, except with some 26th century designs added. The starfighter was painted jet black in the same stealth coating as ONI prowlers, with the idea of a squadron of fighters being able to cause havoc among enemy forces without being detected. The coating was expensive, about half of the ships' maintenance costs, so, currently only Katana fighters had it. With two primary fusion engines and two auxiliary engines, the fighter was strong enough to escape a planet's atmosphere without the use of boosters, a remarkable improvement over the Sabre. It was also meant to complement the Broadsword in atmospheric conditions.

"Pft," Jorge scoffed, finally sitting down on a crate. "Last time I was your RIO, we almost were shot out of the sky by a goddamn supercarrier," he grunted.

"And this guy was also the one who managed to fix a few wires to repair the broken timer on the slipspace bomb," he reminded him.

"Yeah, yeah, whatever," Jorge grunted. It wasn't that he was ungrateful, far from it in fact. But they were having one of their "disagreements", and he'd be damned if he let Six win this one!

Nathan smirked. "I'll take that as a thank you." He jumped out of the cockpit and dusted his hands off. "There, all done."

"What exactly did you do?"

"I just changed some settings around for my personal preferences," he replied with a shrug.

"Hope those 'preferences' don't involve us making dangerous turns in asteroid belts and attacking a nineteen-mile long ship." Six only smiled knowingly. Yep. He was screwed.

"Nathan...Jorge...I take it everything is prepared?" came a voice from behind the two Spartan teams. The two went to attention

immediately. It was Commander-117, along with Fred-104, Kelly-087, and Linda-058, the infamous Blue Team.

"Aye sir, made the bay nice and comfortable for the squidheads," Jorge reported with lax in politesse.

"All right," John nodded as he noticed the rest of NOBLE team, Crimson, Majestic, Shadow, Avalanche, and various SPARTAN-IVs from different fireteams arrive in the bay.

"Heh, all these fireteams here and probably going to watch their fellow Spartans get their asses kicked...again," Kelly noted with a shake of her head. It wasn't meant to belittle the IVs-although they certainly did make a bad first impression when she first met the lot of them-it just the god honest truth. No need to sugarcoat it.

"We'll see, Kelly. I've been putting them through hell for the past six months. Don't knock my program," said Fred, a bit peeved that his pseudo protocols were being doubted already. Linda just shook her head and stayed quiet.

"Well we'll see it put to the test, huh?"

John took it as his time to quietly leave Blue-Team behind and walked toward the barrier that kept a suitable level of oxygen inside the bay. "Quite a sight, isn't it Chief? A bunch of Spartans excited to see Sangheili on a friendly basis," Cortana quipped inside his helmet. John only nodded in agreement.

"Phantom dropship inbound, all hands prepare for immediate arrival," a female voice said over the intercom. Every Marine, Spartan and Naval personnel immediately stopped what they were doing. Soon enough a blue colored Phantom dropship made its way into to the hangar and hovered dead center over the landing pad. Magnetic locks from the ceiling held it in place. Dozens of Sangheili in black armor, black and silver armor, and dark grey armor, landed on Infinity's deck.

John immediately recognized a few of them. Four of them were from the coveted "Ghost" squad, the Sangheili's equivalent of Blue Team. Out of every Spartan on Infinity, he and Nathan were the only ones who were able to match, and ultimately, defeat them, and even then it was a close call. They thoroughly defeated the other Spartans, including the IIIs, and utterly "shit-stomped" the IVs, as one ODST put it.

Marines, ODST, and Spartans immediately mingled with the eight-foot tall aliens, being extremely social with the Special Operations forces. One final occupant that John didn't expect dropped down from the Phantom: Rtas 'Vadum. The Special Operations Commander immediately strolled toward him, his posture friendly.

"It's been too long, Spartan," Rtas greeted beating his chest.

"Well aren't you too just the biggest of pals," Cortana teased. John ignored her completely.

"It has, Rtas," John agreed, though he was still confused by his presence. "Don't get me wrong, I'm glad we could meet again, but what

are you doing here? I thought you were in command of the _Shadow of Intent_?"

"I am. But the Arbiter feels he's...how you humans say...out of his element? He wants to see if he can still command a ship like he used too. So I turned over command of the Intent to him...temporarily. My warriors were also itching for a fight and I came to see if they lived up to my expectations."

"I see," John nodded. "I'll likely be participating myself. Care to join me?" he offered.

"Ha! You pose a great challenge, Spartan. Very well, I too haven't seen much ground combat. So I accept."

With that being said, both commanders and their subordinates made their way to the S-deck to see which species was the greatest of them all.

(Mass Effect: The New Journey)

****UNSC **_**Infinity**_**, Unknown location in Perseus Arm, ****

****May 1****st****, 2570 ****

It had been roughly two weeks since the UNSC/Separatist fleet had embarked on their long-term joint deployment. So far things were going smoothly, all around. They were finding all kinds of planets that could be used for colonization, training garrisons, R&D outposts, and, more importantly, resources. Unfortunately, the search for Forerunner relics came up quite short.

All throughout the deployment various training exercises involving every branch was partaken in. Fighter squadrons were mock dogfighting with Seraphs, practicing strafing runs, holding key choke points as well as protecting flagships. Lasky had to give the Arbiter some credit. For an alien who hadn't commanded a ship in roughly twenty years, the man was still a brilliant tactician and kept the Admiral on his toes. Even still, the Arbiter felt that his skill still wasn't up to par what he used to do. Lasky, and even Rtas disagreed, but there was no shaking of the Sangheili leader's resolve to improve.

As for the Wargames, Majestic and Crimson had definitely closed the gap, and had won a few rounds with the Spec Ops Elites, but still came up short when facing the "Ghosts". Instead of competing head to head species against species, this week the teams were mixed and matched. Some teams, understandably, didn't work well together at all, but on the flip side, others were taking objectives, defeating other teams with ridiculous amount of ease.

****GAME OVER ****

Lasky sipped on his cocoa as he finally watched the wargames match with Blue Team and the Ghosts finished. They were up against four SPARTAN-IV fireteams playing "territories". Despite being outnumbered 3-to-1, the mixed species team managed to come out on top.

"Your teams are pretty exceptional, Shipmaster, Arbiter." Lasky commented towards both Sangheili who were watching the teams from the

tower that overlooked the S-Deck

Rtas waved them off. "I thank your for the praise, Admiral, but they are simply doing their jobs."

"You're allowed to be impressed you know that, right?"

"I know. I simply can't allow my praise to get to their heads. A humble warrior is often the most dangerous on the battlefield."

The admiral couldn't find any fault in his logic. "So I see. Any suggestions on what they should play next?" Honestly, he could watch them play all day, because not a single game was played the same and it held his complete and undivided attention.

Thel looked down at a list of what the humans called "game types." He pointed to one and showed it to the admiral.

"Extraction?" Lasky raised an interested brow. "Hmm...interesting. I'll have one of our technicians set itâ€œ"

"Um...Admiral...you and the Arbiter better get up to the bridge and fast."

Lasky couldn't help but feel annoyed. "What is it Roland? I told you to leave anything of note to my XO."

"I'm aware, Admiral, but we have a situation on our hands. We've found something."

"What is it? Have we found a Forerunner relic? Remnants of Storm activity?"

"We've found something, sir...and it's not UNSC, Covenant, _or_ Forerunner in origin."

The blood of everyone in the room suddenly ran cold. Lasky suddenly got deadly serious. "Roland, tell, Commander-117 to meet me at the bridge, Delta-8 priority. All fighters are to return to their hangars, prep for an immediate deployment: real world. All wargames are canceled for the day. I want Infinity and everyone else at full combat alert status and I want it done yesterday!" If this was a First Contact scenario, Lasky wasn't about to have humanity's flagship caught with their pants down.

"Aye, aye Admiral, orders being relayed...now. It's done." As if on cue, alarms started to ring throughout the ship. The Spartans on the S-Deck scrambled to armories to lock and load as Infinity went on full alert.

"Attention all hands, this is Roland. A situation has developed. All combat personnel are to immediately prep for possible deployment. I repeat all combat personnel are to _immediately_ prep for possible deployment. This is _not_ a drill. UNSC Infinity is now DEFCON 2. I repeat UNSC Infinity is now DEFCON 2!"

"Are you returning to your ships, Arbiter? Rtas?" Lasky inquired as the two Sangheili followed him towards the elevator.

"No. It's too risky in case this is a first contact scenario. We'd

have no protection as all fighters are being prepped for real combat. I trust my shipmasters to do their jobs competently."

Lasky bobbed his head and the three officers stepped out on to the bridge. The bridge was full of pandemonium to the point where no one bothered for formalities, not that Lasky even remotely cared. As ordered, John was waiting for them, having arrived a bit earlier than they did. "What's the situation, Roland?" the admiral all but demanded as he came to the holotable.

"I'll be brief and straight to the point. Our scout teams decided to edge out a bit into the system, and they found this." A holographic object appeared on the table. It was most definitely a starship of some kind, in some ways reminded the Chief of the Didact's ship, Mantle's Approach, and yet it was a fully unique design on its own. The ship was enormous, easily dwarfing Infinity by a factor of eight. Even with its size, it was damaged, likely beyond repair judging from all of the gaping holes in it.

"Preliminary scans show nothing out of the ordinary, but its certainly...troubling."

"Yes...we might be on the verge of another galactic civilization," Thel said dolefully.

"Tell me, Spartan. I heard that your construct has more data on the Forerunners, than all of us. Does she know of anything?" Rtas asked John.

"I can certainly speak for myself," Cortana replied, appearing on the table. She brought up several documents in front of her, seemingly going through hundreds of Exabyte of information a second. "This is interesting, nothing in the Forerunners data indicated anything that matches thisâ€" she paused as her eyes widened in panic. "Wait...this can't be right."

"Cortana..." John said seriously.

"Oh, God. No." she turned her head sharply to Lasky. "Admiral, you've got to get Infinity out of-"

"Sir! That ship is giving off readings charts! It's-"

Suddenly the supposedly 'dead' ship came alive and shot fifty one distinct beams that connected with every UNSC/Separatist ship. "Roland! Get us the fuck out of here!" he ordered with a roar.

"Can't sir! That ship has us completely immobile we'reâ€" "

Suddenly, Lasky felt like he was being pulled. Which is exactly what was happening to the entire Joint Fleet. All fifty-one ships were being pulled in the exact same matter the Didact used to trap Infinity on Requiem.

John felt dizzy and experienced a falling sensation. He landed on...something...but he wasn't sure what. Wincing from a headache he looked around to see Lasky, the Arbiter, and Rtas, slowing picking themselves up.

"Where are we?" That was the million-dollar question. They sure as hell weren't on Infinity, anymore.

"So, you've all come at last," came the masculine voice of a disembodied person. The four leaders instinctively went back-to-back, covering all of their sixes.

A figure materialized itself in front of them. For the first time in decades, John-117's jaw dropped to the floor in complete shock. Standing in front of them was not a Forerunner, Flood specimen, or even an alien. It was a human. An honest-to-God human. He had dark hair, markings on his face, and an attire that was not UNSC norm, but he was unquestionably a homo sapien.

Rtas growled. "What sorcery is this? Who are you?"

"_My name is...Forthencho. I am...or rather was, the Lord of Admirals and effectively, the military leader of the Ancient Human Civilization_."

Millions of questions were burning through all four minds, but Lasky gained his bearing and spoke collectively for them. "What have you done? Why have you brought us here?"

"Do not worry, I have simply locked down your ships' systems with a powerful constraint field. Your technology is primitive to ours to the point where it could be divided amongst all of your ships and leave you completely immobile. As for why I have brought you for specifically here. I have a task for you."

"A task...what kind?" John asked, playing along.

"This is no mere starship...but a gateway to another galaxy in the Local Galactic Group."

"Your empire was intergalactic?" Thel asked in bewilderment. They truly were insects compared to the Forerunners and Ancient humans.

"Yes and no. We knew the Forerunners would eventually destroy us and hunt us down until every last one of us was either dead or reset back to the stone. So we decided to move to a new galaxy, a process we called the "New Journey". Somehow, the Didact learned of our plan and launched an all out invasion of our territory. We fled with as many as we could save to the Perseus Arm, here. Creating the most powerful Slipspace portal in the history of our kind, I sent them through. I stayed behind to maintain the portal and gateway in case our kind from this galaxy needed to go through again. Eventually, my body died and only my consciousness remained."

"You couldn't have known they'd survive," Lasky said.

Forthencho shook his head. "I didn't...at least not until years later. In a coincidence that was unlike anything I've seen, our race discovered a planet with nearly the exact same properties as our home world. The journey damaged their ships and some of our technology, yet communication remained somehow. However, after a certain time I lost contact 50,000 years ago and I'm uncertain as to why. However, I do know that the human race in this galaxy is thriving and on an eve of a discovery that will change their society. We cannot allow that

to happen."

"Why is that?"

"Instincts. They've allowed me to survive hundreds of engagements with the Didact and their telling me that this will bring them to the path of stagnation," he lied...sort of. He kept the real reason he knew this to himself, as they'd find out the truth sooner or later. There were some lies in his story too, but he bent the truth enough just to make it seem believable.

"What does that have to do with us?" Lasky all but demanded. His patience was wearing thin.

"It's simple. I'm tasking you with going through the portal and stopping them from acquiring this primitive technology and replace it with your own, and become allies. Lead that humanity on the right path and take their rightful place in the galaxy."

"Absolutely not," Lasky refused outright. "What the hell makes you think we can just do that? There are soldiers on these ships with families and you want us to leave them behind and expect them to live in another galaxy?!"

"You know the effects of Slipspace. Time can seem relative, potentially. Six months there might mean a day might pass here."

Lasky was about to reply before Thel put a hand on his shoulder. "What is in it for us, Human?" Although he certainly wasn't fond of the idea as a whole, in the Arbiter's mind, they pretty much had no choice the moment their fleet was caught in the restraint field. Rtas agreed with him.

"My offer is simple. Complete this task I'll give your UNSC and its allies complete and total access to our technology, allowing you to make technological jumps in decades what would normally take you thousands of years. Although the Forerunners left you as their inheritors, our technology will be far easier to reverse-engineer."

"We'll go," John replied.

"Commander, you can't just makeâ€" "

"Admiral, I understand where you're coming from. Truly, I do. But let's look at the facts here. He has us trapped here, and despite all of Infinity's upgrades, he did it with child's play. I wouldn't be surprised if he could blow us out of space with ease. Do you honestly think he's going to let us go? Second, I was created to protect humanity...ALL of it, regardless of what galaxy they were in. Third, we're being offered, practically for free, unrestricted access to technology that can jump humanity forward so we can recover and be whole again. Considering those facts, I'd say we're obligated to go through."

Lasky opened his mouth to argue...but couldn't find the words. His logic was sound. He turned back to the Ancient Human. "How do we know you'll keep your word?"

The Lord of Admirals visibly recoiled as if struck, insulted. He gave Lasky a glare. "I have a duty to my people, Admiral. My sole purpose was to protect, preserve, and extend my peoples' will. That is with the sole purpose that I was born. And every action I take is for the good of humanity. I would never go back on an offer that furthered that purpose!"

The two human admirals gave a stare off, not willing to back down. Lasky grunted. "Fine." The two Sangheili looked at each other and nodded. They had accepted as well.

"What will we tell the crew?"

"Nothing. As far as they're aware, this will be just a freak accident." He snapped his fingers and the environment they were in started to slowly vanish. "Propel humankind forward and you shall have your reward." The Lord of Admirals vanished completely as well as the four leaders.

All fifty-one ships connected the constraint field soon vanished in a slipspace bubble, one by-one.

(Mass Effect: The New Journey)

****SSV **_**Einstein**_**, Sol System, near Pluto****

****September 18****th****, 2054****

Lieutenant Commander Charles Hackett strolled his way down the hallways of one of Humanity's first starships, the SSV Einstein. A year or so ago, Humanity had made its greatest discovery. A cache of alien technology was discovered in subterranean ruins on Mars, by a multinational team of astronauts. Humanity was no longer alone in the universe. Months later, Earth's largest eighteen nations drafted the Systems Alliance charter which would represent humanity on the galactic stage should they ever encounter alien life. Schematics were drawn up and the technology discovered was quickly reversed engineered and studied. The Einstein was one of the very first true spaceships to roll off the shipyard. Hackett was assigned this ship for his exemplary service in the United States Navy and was chosen to be one of the first commanding officers of the Systems Alliance. It was a true honor.

"Status report," he asked one of his ensigns as he walked onto the bridge.

"Sir, we'll be near Pluto within the next five minutes," replied Ensign Victoria Shepard. The woman was tough as nails, did her job extremely well, and most of all, extraordinary beautiful.

Hackett nodded. "Good work, ensign. You're a natural," he complemented.

"Just doing my job, sir," she replied, inwardly beaming that THE Charles Hackett had complimented her job.

Hackett then thought back to their mission. One of the Alliance's probes had detected some strange readings coming from one of the moons orbiting Pluto. It had gone undetected for decades, but now with the alien cache, entirely new doors of science opened up and

this was but one of many to come.

"Approaching Charon, now Adm-" Victoria Shepard stopped dead in her tracks as she dropped everything she was holding as her heart skipped several beats.

Hackett raised both eyebrows curious at the ensign's behavior. "Are you okay, Hannah?" he asked, using first names to make her feel a bit more comfortable. Victoria shook her head as she fearfully tapped a few buttons on her consoles and swallowed hard.

The sensors brought everything on screen. Hackett lost every trace of color in his skin as he went pale as a ghost. An entire alien fleet of ships that dwarfed the **Einstein** by a ridiculous margin was near the moon of Charon. His eyes went wide as saucers and his jaw dropped completely. There were four ships among the fleet that had to be AT LEAST six kilometers long and the black one looked as if it had enough firepower to sink an entire continent, judging by the outward appearance. Humanity's largest starship was around 600 meters! This wasn't just bad, this outright catastrophic. The commander began to feel weak in the knees.

"Sir, we're being hailed!"

This was it...the moment of truth. Hackett knew he was about to make history, one way or the other, and honestly he didn't know if he was going to live in the next five minutes, let alone the next five days, months, or even years!

"Patch it through."

"This is Admiral Thomas Lasky of the UNSC/Separatist forces. We mean you no harm or hostile intent!"

(Mass Effect: The New Journey)

End

And that's a wrap! What'd you think? Would you all rather me continue this or Paradigm Shifts?

Also, I need your help! You know about the Ghosts Sangheili that I mentioned? Here's your chance to create some of your own. I will pick the four best that I like and give a shout out/credit to those I pick. All I need is their name, a description (do they have scars, how tall they are, etc), a genuine personality, character history, and finally what form of combat they specialize in. Just about anything is fair game except ONE thing: they absolutely CANNOT hate humans. Can they have hated humans in the past? Sure, hell go into detail about what changed their opinion if you so choose, but they can't hate humans right now.

Codex:

YSS-2000 Katana: Developed in 2566 and entering service in March of 2570, the Katana is the intended replacement for the YSS-1000 Sabre and is intended to be a stealth Space superiority fighter. It has all of the capabilities of Sabre and some unique to itself. Approximately half of the Katanas in existence are onboard the UNSC Infinity with the other half remaining at Earth.

MA5E Hybrid Assault Rifle: Developed in 2560, the MA5E is the standard Assault Rifle for UNSC combat teams as of 2570. The rifle fires 7.62 rounds that have are coated with high heat plasma mere moments before they leave the barrel, creating a logical hybrid between the UNSC's kinetic weapons and the Covenant's direct energy weapons. The MA5E can be adjusted so the encoded plasma is less "flashy" for stealth missions, but this weakens the overall stopping power in comparison.

NOBLE Team: Seeing as how he knew Reach would inevitably fall and the Spartans would be needed elsewhere, Admiral Whitcomb ordered NOBLE team off of Reach while he stayed behind. Unknowingly, the admiral's order had saved the Spartan's lives.

2. Alliances and Second Contact

**Mass Effect: The New Journey **

Chapter Two: Alliances and Second Contact

Wow! I most definitely did NOT expect the amount of reviews/follows/favs I got in the three days I posted TNJ. Hell, it got more follows than _Paradigm Shifts_ did in entire existence! I think the choice is clear: _Halo: Paradigm Shifts_ is_ officially_ abandoned and canceled entirely. If anyone wants to adopt it, just PM me and I'll give you all the details you'll need.

As for this story, as I said before in HPS, Mass Effect: The New Journey will not just be a Halo/Mass Effect crossover, but will also be a Titanfall crossover as well (elements of which you'll see in this chapter! :O!)

Again, I have to stressed I'm taking _**extreme**_ liberties with the events and of both canons for the sake A) Originality, B) Because it's fucking awesome and C) So you guys can be entertained and enjoy what you're reading. So, if you have a question of why this was changed there's your answer: because this isn't canon. Suck it up, _**deal with it**_, and just enjoy the copious amounts of badass.

First part of this chapter is to answer a lot of questions I've been getting in reviews in story form.

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(insert line break)

UNSC Infinity, Sol System, 40,000 kilometers from Charon

September 17**th****, 2054**

"Chief!"

He heard her say.

"Chief! Wake up!"

There it was again. The voice felt so familiar and yet so alien at the same time. He was in pain. Copious amounts of it in fact. The SPARTAN-II was slowly parting his eyelids, his eyes adjusting to the light.

"Chief! Come on!"

Who was she? Did he know her? Why was her voice practically in his head? He tried moving a finger. A twitch. A single twitch...but not full movement.

"John! I need you!"

In that single instant, everything came back to him: Halsey at the playground in Elysium City, Seventy-Four other kids, Chief Mendez, Kelly, Sam, the augmentations, the Covenant, the Fall of Reach, the Ark, Johnson's sacrifice, Requiem, the Didact, and most of all...

"Cortana!" John exasperated out, retracting his helmet with a mental command and vomiting as if he had just been out of a cryotube. His face was covered again not even a second after he was done emptying the contents of his stomach.

"Oh, thank goodness," the AI spoke softly, the relief in her voice as clear as a summer day. "Your vitals were going weak and nothing I was doing to your armor was workingâ€"

"Cortana..."

"I tried everything, rebooting your systems, your suits internal AEDâ€" she continued on, unperturbed, either ignoring the commander or not even hearing him. John honestly couldn't tell which.

"Cortana..." John tried to interrupt again.

"Then your heart was weak and I kept calling you for what seemed like days andâ€"

"Cortana!" John spoke more sternly, finally getting his companion's attention. "I'm fine, okay, there's no need toâ€"

"I thought I lost you! Again!" the AI shouted back, not hiding any of her true emotions behind any wit or sarcasm. John was honestly a bit taken back. "I was just...so scared

John."

"I see," John held his head down a bit, in shame. "I'm sorry."

Cortana sighed. "Don't be. You know how I get sometimes," she smiled, adding a bit of humor to ease the tension.

John looked around. He was on the bridge of Infinity still, albeit in

a slightly different area of it. Various crewmembers were awakening and picking themselves off the ground. The lights were dim, suggesting the ship was running on emergency power for the time being until the secondary reactors kicked back in. With those upgrades the UNSC provided two weeks ago, he hoped that was sooner rather than later. "Looks like I'm still on the bridge...was that aâ€" "

"Vision? No. I saw everything, Chief," Cortana told him seriously.

"You saw? How?" John asked. He thought it was some kind of vision that he, Rtas, and Thel had shared collectively.

"Chief, Forthencho...he didn't just immobilize our fleet. He transported the four of you simultaneously into another part of his ship. I was in your suit at the time and I powered down my systems to where I could watch and listen. He then transported you back to Infinity where he knewâ€" "

"The crew would be unconscious and wouldn't miss our absence until we came back," John finished. Trapping an entire fleet in a constraint field and transporting four individuals within said fleet to his own ships without the crew being none the wiser? John would be telling a bold face lie if he said he wasn't impressed with the technological feats of the Ancient Human civilization.

"Go Chief, being all detective on me," she joked, chuckling.

"Cortana...this is serious."

"Yeah, I know, but we have a mission. I doubt we're getting home beforehand, so might as well make ourselves at home and do what we do best: win."

"Agreed," John picked himself up to see a slight injured Lasky at the holotable. Rtas and Thel had awakened as well and were helping their human allies, to their relief.

"Status report!" Lasky called out.

"Everyone's green, sir! We had some vehicles come out of their restraints, but nothing too serious. All personnel with injuries are being treated in the infirmary. They'll make a speedy recovery," Roland replied his hologram appearing.

"What about my fleet, construct?" the Arbiter inquired staring straight into the AI's face.

"Just a moment, Arbiter..." Roland said stoically as he contacted the Shadow of Intent, Steeple of Ascent, and the Baptism of Fire. His expression became a bit doleful. "I'm sorry, Arbiter, but it seems there are some plenty of injuries in your fleet. Some worst than others apparently."

"Go, Arbiter, I'll send a team of medics, ASAP," Lasky vowed, staring at the Sangheili.

"Of course. Thank you, Admiral," the arbiter replied gratefully, beating his chest in respect for their human allies.

"When the situation has calmed down, I propose a meeting, in private. We have much to discuss about what we do moving forward," Rtas suggested in a way to not give any cause of suspicion among any eavesdroppers.

"Very well," Lasky agreed. "My quarters should be a good place for privacy." He looked to the Commander, who simply nodded in acquiescence.

"Until then, Admiral." With a beat of their chests, both Sangheili exited the bridge, headed for their docked Phantom and departed for the _Shadow of Intent_. John made his way down to the S-deck to check upon his Spartan brothers and sisters.

Lasky sighed. Long-term deployments he could totally handle, but _lifetime_ ones? Some cosmic god must _really_ hate him.

(line break here)

****UNSC Infinity, Sol System, 40,000 kilometers from Charon****

****September 18****th****, 2054****

Ten hours had passed total since the joint fleet had arrived the new galaxy. Though there were little, if any, major casualties, a lot of equipment did get damaged, and were in need of critical repairs. It didn't matter: that what maintenance crews were for and it did give some of the ship something to keep their minds off things. Lasky was pleased they were showing discipline and not being chaotic. He had enough problems to deal with.

Thel, John, Rtas, Lasky, Roland, and Cortana were in Lasky's quarters, the room being spacious enough for a HIGHCOM gathering, let alone just for four beings plus two smart AI. They all sat around a holotable similar to the one on the bridge, but less advanced due to its uses not being as strenuous.

"Before we begin, Roland, are you absolutely sure that this room is tight?" Lasky asked for the umpteenth time.

"Yes, Admiral. I've swept this room a total of 18,648 times. The chances of what's being discussed in this room being found out by anyone are _zero_."

"Good. What do you have for us, Cortana?"

Cortana brought up a map of the Sol System. "Infinity's new scanners really come in handy. Anyhow, your eyes don't deceive you. Outside of a few of the planets not lining up on our elliptical path...this system is an exact copy of ours. We're near one of Pluto's moons, Charon." She then brought up the 3D image of Earth.

Lasky narrowed his eyes. "Even the damn continents look the same. Christ."

"How is this possible? I've had many coincidences in my life as a warrior, but this is...unsettling," Rtas commented, staring at the plane he almost glassed eighteen years ago.

"Well...not exactly," Roland jumped in. "If you'll remember fleet master, there are hundreds of millions of galaxies in the observable universe. The number of planets and systems may be incalculable. Some scientists in the 21st century theorized that given the same or similar circumstances, an exact copy of our solar system could be anywhere in the universe. Lo and behold, we prove their theory right, some five hundred years later."

"Well, we're here now. We have a task and we won't get home until it's completed."

"The Spartan is correct, we have important matters to discuss. This could potentially be a lifelong journey," said Thel, leaning on his mandibles.

"Of which brings up an important question, Arbiter. We know there are...other humans in this galaxy. The Ancient said so and we see the definitive proof with our preliminary scanning. That being said...we can't afford to send your warriors on too many missions, with your entire male population andâ€"

Thel held his hand up, complete confusion evident on his face. "Wait, Admiral, what are you talking about? Entire male population?"

"Yes...? Sangheili only allows its males to serve in the military, which prompted myâ€"

"Where did you get that idea in your head?" Rtas asked, slightly insulted at the idea, but let it slide on the account that the human was only ignorant.

"Admiral, I'll have you know that the Shipmaster of the Steeple of Ascent, our is, in fact, female. She's the third highest ranking Sangheili in the Fleet of Glorious Repentance after Rtas and myself," Thel explained to the shock of everyone else in the room.

"Okay, totally didn't see that one coming," Cortana admitted privately to John. Half of her was still in his suit.

"I thought Sangheili had forbidden females from serving."

Rtas gave the elite equivalent of a snort. "There is no law forbidding any females from joining our ranks. A warrior is a warrior in the eyes of the Sangheili, but most females of our race simply choose not to serve, even though all Sangheili are trained to fight and defend themselves. After the Covenant fractured, as you know, we were a bit lost, and some of the females had to pick up some slack. It started a movement where more females joined our ranks on the battlefield in destroying the Storm, earning our respect. They've been an active part of our forces for over 15 years now. One in every three Sangheili who volunteered to be a part of this fleet was female, to make up for the wrongdoings of their husbands and mates. They were gladly accepted. There's no gender discrimination in our race, we value strength, courage, and honor, regardless of where it comes from."

"Huh, how about that?" Lasky whistled. Well, that was one less

problem they had to deal with.

"See, Chief? You learn something everyday when _I'm_ around."

"Cortana..."

"Right. Sorry. Anyhow...?"

"So, we essentially have to, excuse me for being blunt here, uplift this galaxy's humans technological level enough for them to take over this galaxy unopposed?" Roland asked, making sure his logic algorithms were still functioning.

"Essentially, yes." Lasky confirmed.

"Hmm..." The AI thought to himself. "I think I might have some solutions."

"We're all ears, Roland. At this point, I'm willing to do anything to get us back home."

"I propose we give the technology to them in doses...tiers if you will. Not giving them, everything that we know all at once. Some areas here, some areas there, but not currently."

"And what exactly does that accomplish, construct?" Rtas asked.

"It's both for our own safety and for a way for these humans to "feel" as if they "earned" it," Roland explained.

"Our own safety? What would we have to fear?"

"Well I'm glad you asked, Arbiter!" he quipped, puffing his chest out. Lasky rolled his eyes at his antics. "Think about it...we don't know how these humans will react to our presence. We can guess, but ultimately, we won't know for sure. But, lets back up and assume the best case scenario: they welcome us with open arms...at least the ones who know we're here to guide them that isâ€"I'll get to that point in a secondâ€"and we start showing them slipspace drives, MAC guns, Archer missiles, medic tech, etc. Who's to say it'll stay that way for however long we'll be here? What if their leaders get new management and aren't as...welcoming?"

"I see," Thel replied. "You want to keep them at a level consistently below our current capabilities in case they turn on us, however low that chance may be in reality? But given our circumstances, you're not willing to risk anything."

Roland nodded. "Indeed. This is both to cover our asses and to make them think they are advancing on their own."

"A solid plan, Roland. I like it. However, what do we do to "push" them along so to speak?" Lasky further probed the AI.

"The humans in our galaxy were an innovative bunch. I doubt a few million light-years is going to change _that_ aspect of your species."

Cortana brought up some schematics and then played the recording of Forthencho's voice. "He mentioned something about us preventing them from requiring a 'primitive' technology compared to our own that would lead them to a path of 'stagnation'...whatever that means."

"Need I remind you that you humans with your so called _inferior_ technology manage to _survive_ engaging the Covenant for thirty years," Rtas reminded every one of them.

"You sound like you have a plan," John noted, speaking up after awhile of silent listening.

The Spec Ops commander put a finger to a mandible, as if in deep thought. "Perhaps...you humans are innovative. That much is certain. That's an area where my people pale in comparison to yours." Lasky and John kept a stoic face at the praise. "However...we shouldn't just dismiss this unknown technology, just yet. Perhaps study it...learn from it...adapt it...combine it with ours."

Both of Lasky's eyebrows shot up. "Interesting idea. I approve. We'll guide them to ours, but we won't let them think ours is the only tech we should use." Forthencho's words echoed in his mind _' a path to stagnation..._'.

"I approve as well. Admiral Lasky, do you have any ideas of your own?"

"I do," Lasky replied with a nod and stood up. "We can't join them...or at least not officially, nor can we replace UNSC culture with their own. Now, obviously, things like slavery, racism, sexism and all that don't apply, but at its core they still need to be...whatever these humans call themselves. So no...we're just going to be military and scientific advisers, along with being allies. Nothing more and nothing less."

"Admiral, I think you and I think alike more than you like to admit," Roland smirked. "Cause your plans perfectly aligned with mine."

"How?"

"Well, they said they were on an eve of a discovery of acquiring technology that was heavily implied to allow them to traverse the stars. Now if humanity were smart, which it's proven time and time again that it has, they'll have a single government organization in space, at least to represent them. Whether or not the nations on earth are sovereign or not is irrelevant, as we only need to concern ourselves with the potential supranational organization that is this humanity's military, scientific, and political representative in the stars. I propose we meet the top brass of this organization and we tell them everything."

Lasky narrowed his eyes. "Everything? The fuck do you mean, _everything_?"

Ignoring the Admiral's brief lapse in decorum aside, Roland explained, "Now, now, there's no need for foul language Admiral. Just hear me out, okay? Think about it, sir. We have a fleet that consists of hundreds of thousands of troops and thousands of vehicles. Not to

mention, half of the fleet are _humans from another galaxy_. Based on that Ancient Humans words he implied that the humans haven't left the Sol System. If you were the average citizen and Infinity and her fleet of humans just showed up, if you were a rational person wouldn't alarm bells be set off almost _immediately_? Especially considering that, again, they were going to discover different tech than us, we have ship designs that are probably entirely different than what they have currently. It took us six hundred years to get to the level to build a six-kilometer ship. Do you really think they'll buy that we're just some secret part of their civilization no one knew about until we recently decided to show ourselves? We don't have to tell them we were tasked to guide them at all, but we can propose an alliance like you said."

It was then Lasky caught on to what Roland was getting at. "You want us to meet with the top brass so they keep the fact that we're from another galaxy top secret need-to -know."

"You hit the jackpot, Admiral!" Roland grinned, giving him a quick salute.

"Sorry to say, Roland. But they won't keep Infinity a secret for long. Questions will be asked," Cortana crossed her arms.

"Not necessarily," said John, disagreeing. "Once we get the alliance and they start building ships like us, we won't stand out as much. However, Infinity can remain a secret weapon, while our other cruisers may assist them in some things, seeing as we don't have the manpower to take on the galaxy." He looked to the Elites. "Rtas. Thel. You and the rest of the Sangheili going to have to be the face to the public."

"I do not understand, Spartan," Rtas admitted.

"Until a certain time period passes, the Infinity and its humans can't be known to exist outside of our hypothetical "top brass", because they will put two and two together. If they meet you, aliens, and see that you're friendly and only want to help..." he let it hang in the air. "Once it's safe enough to go public without questions being asked, then we can simply pretend to be apart of this organization where only a handful know the actual truth. We then guide this humanity to the right path, succeed, and then we all go home."

Rtas and Thel looked at each other and both nodded. "Very well, we'll do what we can."

"There's one huge elephant in the room I think you all have simply glossed over," Cortana remarked, crossing her arms, shaking her head. Judging by their silence, she took that as opportunity to elaborate. "The Engineers are good, no doubt, but building a fleet worthy of taking on the galaxy can take years, decades, possibly even centuries at the extreme end of the spectrum. We may not live long enough to see the fruits of our labors."

Lasky gave her a small smile. "Actually, that was one of the first things I figured out."

Cortana raised an eyebrow. "Really, now? Do tell."

"It's simple: We use slipspace bubbles and cryogenics. I've already talked to some of the Huragok, personally."

"A dangerous game, you're playing, Admiral," Rtas noted, with a slight growl. Of course the Covenant Empire of old was aware of slipspace bubbles and did some small "experiments" (mainly to not "offend" the gods as the Prophets dubbed it), but the technology was deemed far too dangerous for practical applications.

"I know...but if we want to see the fruits of our labor, as Cortana dubbed it, we may not have a choice."

"Indeed you may not," Thel admitted. "Forgive me, Admiral, but I'm afraid my people will be hard pressed to do such a thing. The old fears of the Covenant are still strong, even with our alliance."

"I'm aware, Arbiter," Lasky noted. "Your people have a much longer natural lifespan than us, so who knows, you may find some use in the century or so we trap ourselves in."

Thel already had an idea in mind, but that depended on two important factors: finding a planet and resources to build more ships.

"This plan is crazy," Cortana admitted. "Can we really pull this off?"

"Well, we're about to find out. Admiral, sensors just picked up a single ship, frigate class by our standards. Within the next ten minutes they'll know there's an entire fleet outside of Pluto," Roland reported. He was both at the bridge and the meeting simultaneously.

Lasky stood up. "Then let's get it done people. We don't have much time. You know the plan. We'll make the rest of it up as we go along."

Everyone stood up and while John and Lasky returned to Infinity's bridge, Rtas and Thel went back to the Shadow of Intent. John silently prayed that his coveted luck could be distributed fleet wide.

"They're in visual range, sir. No doubt they see us," Roland called out as Lasky came up on the bridge. "Hail them."

"Aye aye. You're broadcasting on all known frequencies. Good luck, sir."

Taking a deep breath, Lasky said eighteen words that would forever change the galaxy. "This is Admiral Thomas Lasky of the UNSC/Separatist forces. We mean you no harm or hostile intent!"

John prayed that his coveted luck would be shined on the entire fleet.

(Line break here)

****SSV Einstein, Sol System, near Pluto ****

****September 18****th****, 2054****

The broadcast came over the speakers as everyone on the Einstein waited with a baited breath. "_This is Admiral Thomas Lasky of the UNSC/Separatist forces. We mean you no harm or hostile intent!"_

Cheers erupted throughout the entire ship and Hackett would've joined them in a heartbeat, had he did have an image to keep up. Didn't stop him from having a shit-eating grin on his face, though. Crisis averted!

"This is Lieutenant Commander Charles Hackett of the Human Systems Alliance on board the SSV _Einstein_. Thank you, Admiral, for being non-hostile. If may ask...what's the name of your species? I'm sure there is a lot the human race can learn from you," he spoke diplomatically.

"_I see. Commander...there's a lot you'll need to know. But I have to ask. Can the people of your crew keep a secret?"_

Hackett's faced traced confusion, wondering why in particular he would want to know that? He looked around at the young officers and enlisted personnel looking at him for leadership. They all silently nodded, very seriously. He returned the gesture, believing in them as they were believing in him, now.

"They can, Admiral. Why?"

"_Because commander...the name of my species...is human. I come from a galaxy far, far away. We are of the same species." _

Hackett's eyes widened and the Alliance commander nearly lost his footing. "You...what?! That's...not..." Hackett could barely find the words to contain his shock.

As if to further prove the point home, Lasky's real time image appeared on the vid screen, proving without a shadow-of-a-doubt that his words were true.

"I...see," Hackett swallowed hard, trying to gain his bearing. "How is this possible?"

"_All will be explained in due time. But, I need you to do something for me." _

Hackett stared at the UNSC officer. "What, pray tell, would that be?"

"_This...Systems Alliance. I assume it's your government? Or at least the one that represents you in space?" _

"It is," the commander confirmed.

"_How fast can you get your top leaders and Alliance officers here? It's imperative that you tell them they need to maintain ___**absolute**___ secrecy. We wish to negotiate an alliance." _

"Wait, "we"? Who else is there besidesâ€œ"

"_That would be us, commander_," came the voice of Thel Vadam as his image on his throne in the _Shadow of Intent_ appeared in split screen, to the left of a stoic Lasky. "_My name is Thel Vadam. This is my ship, the Shadow of Intent, and the name of my species is Sangheili. We are allied with the UNSC and Admiral Lasky." _

Hackett caught his breath, flummoxed at seeing a live _alien_. Hannah's jaw dropped. She was sitting here watching history unfold!

"_Look, commander, we don't have much time. I know our sudden being here is huge shock but the fact remains: we need to meet with the Systems Alliance ASAP!"_

Hackett nodded, getting serious. These aliens wanted peace and an alliance. A First Contact scenario_ couldn't_ go any better even under ideal situations. "Very well. I'll get a hold of my superiors. You should know something within the hour. Hackett out."

"Sir...excuse me if I'm out of line, but I think I speak for everyone when I say: Holy. Fucking. _Shit." _

Hackett actually gave a chuckle. "Hannah, believe me. I feel the exact same way. Anyhow, we have to get word back to HQ. You have the bridge." The commander retreated back to his quarters.

Line Break

****Armstrong Station, Geosynchronous Orbit above Earth, Sol System****

****September 18****th****, 2054****

Director Isaac Richards, Commander-in-Chief of the Systems Alliance military and Director of Alliance Extraterrestrial affairs, sat in his office in Armstrong station above earth. He was a tall, fair-skinned, blond, and in perfect physical health, judging from his moderately muscular physique. The only hair on his face was the goatee connected to his mustache and goatee, which he always kept clean. He was only in his late 30s, but he was a decorated military officer from the United Kingdom, where his parents emigrated from the United States, when he was barely eight years old. He never could get rid of his American accent.

The man was a born leader and always took charge, mostly subconsciously, when the opportunity presented itself. He graduated high school at the age of seventeen and joined the University Air Squadron unit in London. He graduated at the top of his class with ease. Richards ended up being the youngest ever Air Commodore in the UK's history during times of peace, and headed the expedition to Mars to investigate the year before. Once the alien ruins were found, he and some of his fellow officers drew up plans for the Systems Alliance, which were readily accepted by Earth's nations. However, the Alliance needed a leader someone bold who they knew could take humanity further when no one else could: the decision was unanimous.

"Ah, memories," Richards remarked, nostalgically. He turned in his chair and stood to stare at Earth. '_What a beautiful planet,'_ he

thought giving a small smile.

His personal intercom system went off suddenly, to his surprise. It was near the end of the work day, usually he got very few personally calls at this point. He pressed a button and spoke. "Director Richards, here."

"Sir, I have a priority message from Commander Hackett. He says its urgent," his secretary told him.

Commander Hackett? Gone for not even half a day and already he had a message? Charles sure did work fast. "How urgent?" He asked, a bit disinterested.

"He told me to tell you it's an '0-8-4' message and to contact him personally before you do anything...eh, whatever that means." It was clear the secretary had no idea of certain terminology used by the Systems Alliance.

Richards was suddenly more awake than at any point in time in his entire life. His eyes widened to their greatest extent. "Miss Lance, take the day off and contact the Chiefs. Tell them I'm giving them a direct order to get their asses to Armstrong station in the next hour or so help me God, I'll have them all replaced without shedding a tear."

"Ye-yes sir!" she stuttered a bit. She had never seen the director so completely serious.

Satisfied that his order would be carried out, the Director gathered his things and went to his quarters and then sealed the room tight. Pressing some icons on a touch screen a computerized voice said, "Identify yourself."

" Director Miles Andre Richards, Systems Alliance, access code 383271."

"Identity confirmed. Alpha encryption protocols now enabled. Setting up...three...two...one. Connection secure. Whom would you like to contact Director?"

"Lieutenant Commander Charles Hackett, SSV Einstein."

"Affirmative, Director. Standby."

Richards went to parade rest and waited. Within ten seconds, Charles Hackett's face appeared on screen, on the most secure channel in human space. The commander immediately saluted. "Director Richards, sir!"

Richards saluted back, professionally, and then got deathly serious. "You mind telling me what in the blazes of fuck is going out there, Commander? You had better have a damn good reason for why I shouldn't have had the entire planet go on lockdown and full alert, because I would've had you not specifically told me not too."

Hackett sighed, expecting this. "Sir, are we using a secure line, because what I'm about to tell you absolutely cannot be leaked out at all costs."

"We are, Commander. This channel has encryption protocols that would take supercomputers days to break. Now, cut to the chase. You called an '0-8-4', which is code for another alien civilization. What are we dealing with?"

"Sir, the aliens we're dealing with...are humans who claim to be from another galaxy who allied with another species who call themselves Sangheili," Hackette said bluntly.

Richards was taken back. "I...what?! Is this some idea of a joke Commander? Because if itâ€™"

"Sir, does THIS look like a joke to you?!" Hackett practically roared back. The screen went split screen in three ways: One showing his real-time conversation with Hackett, one showing the UNSC/Separatist fleet, and the last one showing the recorded conversation with Admiral Lasky and the Arbiter.

Like Hannah, Richards's eyes went wide as saucers.

"Hu...Humans...and..." Eyeing that large armada make Richards feel very small. That fleet would roll through humanity's current defenses with laughable ease and be back in time for dinner! Four black ships looked to be at least six kilometers long, three of which were of the same design, while the other one...he shuddered.

"Who else knows about this?"

"Aside from my crew, you, director are the only person who knows that there's an alien fleet parked practically at our doorstep. Admiral Lasky asked to meet with you and the Chiefs to forge an alliance. He asked that you keep the meeting entirely secret."

Lasky? So...that must've been the name of the human who undoubtedly was the leader of that flagship. Humans...from another galaxy. If Richards hadn't seen it with his own eyes, he probably would've removed Hackett from command just for the sheer absurdity. "Commander are you sure we can trust them? What if it's a trap?"

"Director, with all due respect, I know you have a trait of looking at every possibility for deceit, but that's an absurd question. These ships look like they can probably nuke our planet back to the Stone Age and they know it. If we were in their position, would you bother with trickery and deception when annihilating us would get the job done much quicker?"

Grunting, the blonde UK citizen conceded to his point.

Richards nodded. "I see. Good work, Commander. I don't know what you said, but humanity might owe you the biggest favor in the galaxy. I'll see you soon. Richards, out." The connection cut off not even a second later.

Sitting down and rubbing his temples he reached over and poured a shot of vodka. God, he was going to need it.

Line break

UNSC Infinity, Sol System, 40,000 kilometers from Charon

****September 18****th****, 2054****

Admiral Lasky paced back and forth on Infinity's bridge, anxiety and uncertainty swelling up from within him. He felt someone grip his shoulder from behind. He gazed back to see Captain Palmer, her face traced with worry.

"Tom..." she spoke softly. "Please...calm down. For me?" she begged.

"I can't, Sarah. I have tens of thousands under my command that I have to look out for. They need me to stay strong."

"You don't have to take on this whole responsibility on your own you know?"

"I know, butâ€"

"Admiral Lasky! The Alliance is hailing us."

"Patch it through, Roland."

Commander Hackett's face appeared, stoic as always. "Admiral Lasky, I've done as you requested. My superiors should be on their way, double time. Where do you want us to have negotiations?"

Lasky gave Hackett an easy smile, pleased at their plan was working, so far at least. "That's good to hear, Commander. As for negotiations...why not your ship? You're already making history, why not go all the way?"

Chuckling, the Alliance officer nodded. "I suppose you're right. Very well. I'll have everything set up. I'm pretty sure I don't have to ask if you have dropships that can dock do you?" he inquired semi-rhetorically, smirking a bit.

Lasky returned the expression. "I guess I got a couple."

"Good. I'll see you soon, Admiral." The connection was cut.

"They seem like ol' pals," Cortana remarked inside John's helmet.

"Probably due to the fact that they're both Human," John replied as-a-matter-of-factly.

"Commander, Captain, you're coming with me to provide security," Lasky ordered both senior officers. John and Palmer both nodded.

"Security, huh? What? You think we'll get in trouble?" Palmer teased, slightly laughing.

"You can never be too careful."

Now that was something the commander agreed with wholeheartedly.

Line Break

****SSV Armstrong, En-Route to Pluto****

****September 18****th****, 2054****

The SSV Armstrong pushed its ion engines to the limit as the delegated ship made its way to Pluto. Director Richards sat in a room with four other figures at a table. They were: General Nikolai Petrov, a Russian-born Chief of the Systems Alliance Marine Corps, Admiral Hugh Ashdown, Chief of Naval Operations, General Gabriel Santiago, Chief of Logistics and Exploration Corps, and finally, Admiral Sayuri Takahashi, Chief of OAI or the Office of Alliance Intelligence.

Collectively, the people in this room were unofficially considered to be the most powerful humans in existence with an absurd amount of power and political influence. They were Joint Chiefs of Alliance Operations, or the "Chiefs" as they were referred to in Alliance jargon.

"Director Richards, my friend, what is this all about?" Petrov asked in a thick Russian accent, resisting the urge to light up his cigar, knowing it was expressly against Alliance regulations. "I was in middle of good rest before you called me up here threatening to replace me if I didn't."

"Yes, Director, I agree with the General. You don't call all four of us unless it's important." Despite her first language being Japanese, Admiral Takahashi's English was pitch perfect, with little traces of her accent slipping through. She gave the Director a small glare. Lesser men would've been extremely fearful of the admiral, but he wasn't in the slightest. He controlled her, not the other way around, like some weak dog. The woman was dangerous, he knew for a fact, but he couldn't deny that no one did Intelligence quite like she did. So he kept her on a tight, but long leash.

Admiral Ashdown and General Santiago chose not to comment feeling Takahashi and Petrov had said enough.

"I'll be blunt and get straight to the point. Commander Hackett has asked us to meet at Pluto because we have an '0-8-4' situation on our hands."

If the situation weren't so serious, Richards probably would've spent days guffawing. Color drained from their faces as all of them went pale, including Takahashi.

Ashdown rose from his seat. "An 0-8-4?! Why the hell isn't Earth on full alert and we're not at full scale mobilizaâ€œ"

"Admiral ******, sit down ******," Richards said forcibly, narrowing his eyes. He was not in the mood to deal with stupidity. "Do you really think I would call you all the way here in a situation like this, if everything weren't under control?" Their silence told all. "What I'm about to reveal to you absolutely will not leave this room with the consequences of not heeding that will be ****_death_****: do I make myself clear?" All four of them nodded, if a bit uneasily. The director was usually laid back and a bit easy going, but now...

It was then that the Director had told them everything that Commander

Hackett had relayed to them. To say they were stunned would've been putting it lightly. But soon shock was replaced with excitement and opportunity, especially Takahashi. She couldn't wait to meet these humans.

Line Break

It was only a few hours later that the Armstrong had arrived near the edge of the Sol System. Admiral Ashdown was practically drooling at the sight of seeing the UNSC Infinity, his reaction being more in an "**I want one**" type of way, rather than shock or fear. General Santiago was intrigued more so on the feasibility and how they managed to build such a gargantuan ship. Petrov was impressed, truly, but he wanted to see how these humans stacked up to his marines. Admiral Takahashi had a huge smirk on her face as her conniving mind started to think of numerous plans.

Director Richards whistled in awe. "It's one thing seeing a picture, but seeing it up close? Well, I'll be damned."

Receiving instructions from Hackett, the Armstrong linked up with the Einstein and Richards and his subordinates disembarked where the Alliance Commander and Hannah Shepard were waiting in parade rest. Both went to attention and gave them a crisp salute, which all five returned with equal sharpness simultaneously.

"Welcome aboard the SSV Einstein, sirs, ma'am," Hackett spoke professionally. Hannah would be lying if she said she wasn't nervous. These people were the top brass who controlled the Alliance for God's sake!

"At ease commander, ensign" Richards ordered. Charles immediately relaxed his posture and stretched some muscles.

"Our guests should be arriving shortly, ensign, could you show the Director to the conference room?"

"Aye, sir," Hannah obeyed, saluting her superior and leading Richards and the Chiefs to the delegation room that was set up prior to their arrival.

Now, all Hackett could do was wait.

Line Break

Inside the UNSC Infinity's main bay a Pelican was being prepped for departure to the rendezvous point. After getting the go ahead, the dropship rose from the ground and sped out past the atmospheric barriers, heading straight for the Einstein.

"Cortana, you've already infiltrated their systems, yes?" Lasky asked the AI looking directly at John-117.

"Of course. To say their computer technology is primitive is mild understatement. It only took me five seconds to have pretty much every piece of information that's stored in bits," Cortana replied, speaking through John's external speakers.

"Wait, they're still using binary code?" Palmer gaped in surprise. The UNSC stopped using binary code for computers after the Rainforest

Wars, which were practically ages ago as far the Captain was concern.

"While not quite the binary we're used to, the principle is still the same. Even the dumbest UNSC AI would run marathons around their systems. There's no reason to carry any weapons on board either. None of the crew has the capability to take on a Marine, let alone a Spartan or Sangheili. You'll be safe. Trust me." John grunted at that. Being unarmed left him the same feeling of being without his armor: naked and vulnerable. Even still, his trust in Cortana was absolute, so he accepted her judgment without a second thought.

"Anything else of note? Military capability? We have to know what we're working with here, construct," Rtas asked, softly.

"No. Not really. There's nothing really of note that you don't know already. But I say it's best to remain ignorant for now."

"It seems we have arrived," the Arbiter noted, and then turned to the SPARTAN-II. "Are you ready for this, John?"

John gave a huff, amused. "Grand entrance?"

"You're already one, Spartan."

"Did...did the Arbiter just make a good comeback? Oh, man, we really ARE in another galaxy, Chief!" John smacked his helmet. Cortana only grinned ear-to-ear.

The Pelican docked with the Einstein and the UNSC/Separatists went over last minute details, careful to leave out specifics Palmer wouldn't ever know about. The pilot was ordered on standby and the five disembarked inside the airlock. There was a mist that was obviously used for decontamination. Lasky found the mist oddly sweet tasting. He straightened up his uniform. A computerized voice told them that the mist had done its job. The airlock opened and they stepped inside.

Line break

One had to give Commander Hackett some credit. Despite meeting a faction of humanity that was from another galaxy, he was keeping it together remarkably well. His eyes went to the two Sangheili. He had to admit, he was intrigued, if not a bit intimidated. Both were well over eight feet tall, towering over him with ease. Their entire bodies were covered in a type of armor, silver and black for Rtas, and Thel's armor was undoubtedly ceremonial, due to how radically different it was compared to the other Sangheili. Hackett found the four mandibles fascinating for one simple reason: he quietly wanted to know how on earth they chewed their food.

What really caught his attention were Captain Palmer and John. The former was about ten inches taller than he was, whichâ€"a fact that he wouldn't admit to anyoneâ€"slightly unnerving to the officer. She was attractive in the Commander's eyes, but not even close to Hannah. John was even taller than her and his armor looked like he could take a tank cannon at point blank range and still keep going. Either way, Hackett knew the man was extremely dangerous.

"Commander Hackett, glad we could meet," Lasky said smiling, reaching out for a handshake, which the commander shook firmly.

"As well as I, Admiral Lasky. I'll be frank, my crew practically had a heart attack when they saw your fleet."

"Don't worry, commander. We're here to help," Lasky replied. '_In more ways than one.' _

"Follow me," Hackett commanded, turning around and walking away. "My superiors are inside the conference room."

Lasky and the others followed without a second thought. John took the time to scan his surroundings. This ship was small, ridiculously so. Not even ONI Prowlers gave him such a feeling of claustrophobia, even if such a fear was supposed to be suppressed if not outright ignored due to his Spartan training. His armor was taking in every detail of the ship and he resisted the urge to shake his head in disbelief. He understood that they had just discovered alien life less than a year ago, but this ships' armor was pitiful. They'd definitely have to fix that once they showed them how to synthesize Titanium A3. The supersoldier just prayed that this Sol System had an Ort Cloud equivalent. The UNSC still was using resources from it to this day, despite discovering it after the Rainforest Wars. It'd be invaluable in building up a suitable Navy and colony ships for the Systems Alliance.

Even though it was unspoken, it was pretty much a given that the Alliance needed to build a Super Soldier program in the same vein as the SPARTAN-IVs. Although the IVs were great soldiers, due to being trained since childhood, they'd likely never close the gap in skill and experience the SPARTAN-IIIs and the SPARTAN-IIIs had. Considering their relatively peaceful history it was unlikely that they'd be willing to abduct children and turn them into soldiers. Adult volunteers would have to do. They couldn't rely on the UNSC Spartans forever in whatever galactic wars they might face in the future. They simply didn't have the manpower.

Cortana had also briefly mentioned of creating the Systems Alliance version of the ODS. She was stingy on details that she kept to herself, which was fine with John. He had a more pressing issue at hand: getting the Systems Alliance to ally with the Joint Fleet.

They finally went into a room where the doors slid apart letting them through. Richards and his Chiefs were sitting at a large circular table with five empty chairs on the side facing them. Wasting no time the three humans and two Sangheili sat down, thankful that they held firm even with their armor. John noted at how...used...to their appearance they were. Somehow the novelty of seeing aliens must've wore off on their journey. Hackett stood behind Richards at parade rest.

"Thank you for agreeing to come on such short notice Director..." Lasky trailed off, mentally kicking himself for not asking Hackett his name.

" Richards. Issac Richards, Admiral," the blonde Alliance leader told him, his tone friendly, if a bit casual. "These are my colleagues and subordinates: General Petrov Chief of Marine Corp, Admiral James

Ashdown, Chief of Naval Operations, General Gabriel Santiago, Chief of Logistics and Exploration Corps, and finally, Admiral Sayuri Takahashi, Chief of OAI or the Office of Alliance Intelligence."

Internally, John, Lasky, and Palmer immediately went on guard at the mere mention of Takahashi. Lasky narrowed his eyes at the woman, ever so slightly. Rtas and Thel were indifferent, in all honesty.

"I don't trust her, John," Cortana told him seriously. "She reminds me of Parangosky."

"Agreed," John replied softly so he wouldn't be overheard.

"I see. As you know, I'm Admiral Thomas Lasky of the UNSC Infinity, these are my allies, Thel 'Vadum, and Rtas 'Vadum of the Sangheili. The two in the armor are Sarah Palmer, and Commander John-117."

'_117? Is that a code? Why doesn't he have a surname? Special unit perhaps?' _Richards thought, analyzing John, subtly.
'_Armor...abnormal human height and physique...'_

His eyes widened ever so slightly in realization. John was a super soldier. Just what in the blazes of hell were they dealing with here?!

"Admiral, I'm going to be completely honest: you had a lot of folks frightened when we discovered your presence above Pluto. Were it not for Commander Hackett here, twelve billion people would be in a state of mass panic. If your intentions are indeed peaceful, claims you've so far lived up too, why did you request myself and my chiefs in absolute secrecy?"

"Director, we're from another galaxy. _Humans_, from another galaxy, to be more specific. We wish to ally with the Systems Alliance, but not join it."

Richards raised an eyebrow. "Why would you want to ally with us?" Richards had long accepted that these humans were being truthful being from another galaxy, as the Alliance didn't have ships or even _plans_ that came even a tenth of what he was seeing outside the window.

It was Thel who spoke, his deep voice echoing throughout the room, commanding respect. "Human, you may be technologically inferior, that much may be a fact, but even we can't survive out here on our own. We have limited numbers that can't be replaced easily, if at all. Allying with you is that best bet."

"I see," Takahashi replied. "Tell me something, Admiral Lasky. Is the reason you kept this meeting secret is so that no one would ask questions when your human fleet, which I presume are the giant box ships that are painted jet black, shows up in the future?"

"You're a sharp woman, Admiral Takahashi," Lasky complemented sincerely. Honestly, he was glad he didn't have to explain too much. The plan was crazy, but it was their best shot.

"So...I'm assuming that the Systems Alliance will benefit from such a

partnership with you?" Admiral Ashdown asked leaning forward, praying silently to god it meant what he hoped it meant.

"Yes, Admiral. We have scientists on board the _UNSC Infinity_ and _Shadow of Intent_. As well as certain technological innovations that would prove most useful to advancing Systems Alliance, including a method of travelling Faster-Than-Light," Lasky said, dropping a huge bombshell.

Every single one of their eyes widened in shock. Lasky smirked a bit: he had them. Now he just had to reel them in, bit-by-bit.

"Here are the facts, Director, General, Admirals and I'll keep this brief: We were on a joint deployment and we came across an Artifact. We didn't know what it did and while we were investigating, the artifact locked down our systems and we were transported here. Our star charts indicated that we are in another galaxy not of our own. Our ships can travel at over 600 LY per day and we didn't grow old so I'm guessing the artifact did something," Lasky explained through half-truths.

Rtas had to admit; he was impressed with Admiral Lasky. That last part was a bold face lie. The UNSC Infinity had Forerunner drives and could travel _2000_ LY per day. 600 was a complete joke by modern standards. But they didn't have to know that...

"Director Richards," Rtas picked up, using the human's name to appear more personable. "We are trying to get home as well as keep our warriors safe. Admiral Lasky, as Admiral Takahashi has already pointed out, cannot reveal his fleet to your humanity for reasons already addressed, but..."

"But the _Sangheili_ can," General Santiago said catching on.

"Ha! You make brilliant offer my friend!" Petrov grinned, leaning back. "We take you back to Earth, prove existence of aliens and are friendly, no human question where get good technology from, yes? Very, very clever."

Takahashi narrowed her eyes a bit. "Why are you just so willing to give us your technology or at least how it works so...easily? You almost make it sound like it's your mission to do so."

It took everything in Lasky's power to keep a stoic face. "Admiral Takahashi, think about it. Yes, we _could_ very well takeover your planet with ease, likely just from bombing you from orbit. Honestly, there wouldn't be a _damn thing_ you could do to stop us. But where would that leave us? No allies, surviving with few resources, travelling from system to system only to die in vain. The galaxy is a dangerous place. Do you really want us to just leave you be and hope you don't run into a bunch of trigger happy aliens who just want to either keep humanity in their place or outright destroy you? Or would you accept our help and come on to the galactic stage with aâ€"excuse me for being bluntâ€"with a big fucking stick taking jack shit from no one?"

"HA! I love this guy! Blunt and to the point, just like in Mother Russia!" Petrov was obviously pleased with the idea.

Richards looked at the rest of the chiefs. They all nodded to him and

he turned back to the UNSC and Separatists. The Director gave a grin.
"When do we start?"

Palmer, despite not saying anything throughout the entire meeting, allowed a small bit of smugness to show. Lasky smiled. They had them.
"Cortana, if you will?"

John took off a piece of his armor, sat it on the table, and her holographic form appeared. "Hello, Director Richards. My name is Cortana, UNSC Smart AI, serial number CTN 0452-9 at your service."

"You're...an artificial intelligence?!" Takahashi blinked, bewildered. Humanity had been trying for a fifty years to create AI without a single breakthrough!

Richards groaned a bit. Yeah. He was definitely going to need a drink after this meeting...again.

Line break

Timeline:

September 20th, 2054: A secret alliance is formed between the Joint Fleet and the Human Systems Alliance. The UNSC Infinity and her fleet are deemed classified beyond Top Secret. The UNSC fleet is independent from the alliance, yet in times of war can come under the command of the Systems Alliance in emergency situations and to maintain their cover. Commander Hackett is promoted to Captain for his role in Humanity's first contact with aliens. Captain's Hackett's crew on the Einstein is sworn to absolute secrecy. The Charon Relay is essentially an afterthought.

September 21st 2054: It is jointly decided when the UNSC fleet goes public in the coming years, the UNSC fleet will change their ship prefixes to "SSV" to maintain the illusion of being of Alliance origin.

September 30th 2054: The Fleet of Glorious Repentance, as planned, appears publicly to humanity as a whole. Their presence is met with overwhelming positive reaction and propaganda makes the Systems Alliance more popular around the entire world.

December 1st 2054: An Ort Cloud is discovered in the Sol System containing massive amounts of resources.

October 18th, 2055: The Systems Alliance budget grows over fifty times its current size. UNSC scientists meet with Alliance scientists and teach them the principles of Slipspace technology. Sangheili are there to 'assist'.

October 24th, 2056: The first Systems Alliance AI comes online with the help of the UNSC. Orders and contracts are ordered for AIs to be mass-produced where only "smart" ones are reserved for military use only.

Halloween, 2056: The Systems Alliance completes its first slipspace drive. The ship, the SSV Aldine, makes a jump to Pluto and arrives in approximately thirty seconds.

December 7th, 2056: The successful jump to Pluto prompts massive contracts to upcoming corporations to build ships. The Ort Cloud provides resources as the Systems Alliance begins constructing a massive fleet of Phoenix-Class colony ships and warships. The UNSC secretly helps build shipyards with the help of the Huragok.

January 23, 2059: Millions of potential colonists leave Earth to settle new worlds.

February 15th, 2062: The Systems Alliance builds its first Marathon-class cruiser. It's equipped with dual MAC guns, Energy Shielding, Plasma Torpedoes, and Jericho missiles. This complements a fleet of one hundred total warships, mainly of Paris-Class Frigates.

July 2062: The F/A-50 Rapier Space Fighter is created

April 15th, 2063: The Sangheili find a colony planet a light year from Earth and settle upon it to repopulate. They are given resources to build an entire fleet and infrastructure to rebuild the Sangheili empire

March 18th, 2065: As planned, the UNSC enters a Slipspace bubble to pass the time by, while certain personnel stay behind to guide humanity. The Sangheili, as predicted, do not partake in this process

May 2084: The Systems Alliance continues to expand its influence, bringing its number of colonies up to a grand total of 15. The Systems Alliance charter has been signed by every single nation on Earth and a Parliamentary System is set up with Richards as its head. The Systems Alliance controls Earth in all but name.

April 21st 2085: Cortana reveals her plans of two Special Forces units: the N7 Initiative and Project TITANFALL. Now the program is repurposed for two-man assassination unit for deep behind enemy lines. Project TITANFALL was the Alliance's answer to the ODST, with a twist: They dropped in with piloted mechanized 25 feet tall robots called "Titans" which assisted them in battle. The unit is named the TDST, or Titan Drop Shock Troopers.

June 2087: Hammond Industries successfully creates the Ogre, the first Titan for the TDST, after winning a contract bid from the Systems Alliance government.

June 2093: After receiving augmentations, the TDST deploy for the first time ever on Eden Prime, to stop a violent militia group which had formed on the peaceful colony. The results are spectacular and the TDST and Titans devastate the militia with no casualties of their own.

June: 2094: After forty years of expansion, a lone exploration vessel discovers the drell homeworld of Rakhana and its dying eleven billion inhabitants. Admiral Lasky recommends allying with them, citing the Sangheili as proof that they are better off with friends than enemies. After intense deliberation and a very close vote, the Systems Alliance decides to uplift the entire drell population from Rakhana and bring them back to Earth and her colonies. For weeks, dozens upon dozens of Phoenix-class colony ships essentially run round trips around the clock to and from Rakhana. With the warm

welcoming from the Sangheili forty years ago, the drell are accepted by at large as citizens of the Systems Alliance with full rights. Due to the drell's eidetic memory, they learn English without the use of a translator. The Systems Alliance now has five sapient species under its banner.

September 2096: After three months, all eleven billion drell are uplifted from their homeworld. Rakhana is left to die a slow and painful death.

October 2097: Kepral's Syndrome is discovered in a drell community on Eden Prime causing a widespread panic. The UNSC devises a cure within two weeks, reversing the effects completely. The Alliance Parliament passes a law with a unanimous vote that all drell citizens must take the vaccine.

January 2099: Drell are being sent to Alliance basic training to become Marines or Officers, their exceptional memory proving to be invaluable.

March 15th 2099: Plans are drawn up for a Top Secret Systems Alliance Super Soldier Program titled: OMEGA, made from adult volunteers from Delta Force, SAS, Spetsnaz, Israeli Commandos, and other special forces around the globe. John-117, Blue Team, and Sangheili Ghosts would oversee their training.

January 1st, 2100: Humanity and the drell celebrate the dawn of the 22nd century. Although there are some tensions, by and large, drell are integrating rather well with humanity.

January 2119: Fifteen drell are elected to Alliance Parliament. Some Sangheili are invited to join, but decline in favor of staying loyal to the Arbiter.

November 21st, 2120: Steven Hackett is born, grandson of Charles Hackett

December 2148: Miles Xavier takes over the helm as leader of the Systems Alliance. He and his colleagues (Ishigami, Hernandez, Dragovich, Ashdown) are told of the truth behind humanity's advancement to the stars.

July 2149: The OMEGA Super-soldier project begins in earnest

April 11th, 2154: Jane Shepard is born

May 2154: The Charon Relay is uncovered and activated. Slipspace is still considered a superior strategic way of travelling and the Alliance is cautious with new relays.

September 2154: After a hundred years of expansion, a census is conducted. Human: 54 billion, Drell: 23 billion, Sangheili: 18 million, Unggoy: 23 million, Hunters: Unknown, total colonies: 48. Humanity's fleet of ships number in the the thousands, with most being destroyers and frigates of various tonnage and classes

May 2156: Shanxi colony is founded.

November: 2156: After seven years, the OMEGA project is completed with over two thousand recruits graduating. Humanity has a new breed

of soldier.

July 2157: Director Richards and Admiral Lasky make plans to introduce the UNSC Infinity and her escorts to the public after staying in hiding for 102 years.

August 2157: Present day.

Line break

****Taurus-4, Industrial Colony****

****August 25****th****, 2157 ****

TDST Service Chief Tyson Lamont Greystone sighed and stretched his muscles. The light-skinned service chief was a veteran TDST, having been one of the numerous pilots to serve in liberating numerous colonies from violent rebels. He was natural Titan pilot and a runner in his youth so it was no surprise that becoming a TDST was easier for him than others.

Titan Drop Shock Troopers were like the ODSF, yet in many ways completely different. The TDST emphasized constant movement using godly parkour and free running skills, combined with inhuman stamina. TDST pilots were given implants in the form of Nano drones that colonized the pilot's circulatory system into a series of valves and micro pumping mechanisms. This augmentation was able to boost stamina by 500%. In addition, their bones were hardened to withstand great falls up to a certain height, as well as give them impeccable agility and jumping power in combination with micro jet packs all across their armor to literally run on walls and reach heights unimaginable. The fusion pack that powered their armor, which was a combination of plating and regular reinforced BDUs, and had energy shielding equivalent to MJOLNIR Mark V the Master Chief used on the first Halo ring. Alliance Marines also had energy shielding, but they weren't Special Forces, so it, naturally, wasn't as resilient as Tyson's.

"I hope you're doing more than just enjoying the scenery, chief."

Tyson turned behind him and smirked. It was Corporal Tarius Krios, a drell, fellow TDST pilot, and his best friend.

"Tarius you have to stop calling me that, seriously. It makes me feel...I don't know... weird when you call me that."

The drell shook his head laughing. "You know I can't do that, Alliance Regulations."

Tyson grumbled and decided to change the subject. "So...how's your brother doing?"

"Thane? Last time I talk to him he was going through the N7 program on Earth in Brazil."

Tyson whistled dutifully impressed. "N7, eh? Heh, Thane would be the type of guy to want to be an assassin, he already dresses the part. Crazy ass."

"You joined the TDST like I did. You're one to talk."

"Point taken," he conceded. His communicator buzzed. "Chief Greystone, here."

"Got some good news for you, Chief. Some recruits fresh out the Academy just jumped in and will be making a drop. Mind breaking them in for me?"

Tyson couldn't help but grin. So this day might turn out great after all! "It'd be my pleasure, ma'am!"

"Glad to hear it. I'll let you have some fun." Tyson looked up in the sky to see an object falling towards his location. "Coordinates received. ****Standby for Titanfall****." The object slammed into the ground a hundred meters away from him a bubble shield appearing the moment it touched down. No matter how many times he saw it happen, he'd NEVER get tired of seeing a Titan drop from orbit.

"Care to join me Tarius?"

"Can't let you have all the fun!" the drell replied giving a wicked grin.

Tyson sprinted toward the titan mech and its doors opened and he climbed inside with professional grace. The HUD came online showing an ultra-clear view of the battlefield. He grinned at the drop pods that were falling from the sky. Several TDSTs were about to go through his 'Welcome to Taurus-4' initiation course.

God, he fucking loved this job.

Unknown System

Unknown Location

In a Salarian STG ship a meeting was taking place, with a lone STG agent speaking to Councilor Valern on a secure network.

"What do you mean they're gone!?" Valern raised his voice. "How does eleven billion inhabitants just outright disappear out of thin air?"

"We don't know, sir. As you know, the STG has been observing several species with capabilities and potential to master space flight. This one in particular seemed doomed to kill itself off. We saw no reason to interfere. When we checked back weeks ago...the planet was dead...not a single one of those inhabitants. No corpses. No signs of life. Anything."

Valern gave him a hard stare. "Find out what happened to them. Species just don't disappear without a reason." The STG agent nodded and Valern cut off the connection.

"Seems the Galaxy just got a whole lot more complicated," he remarked.

The STG agent had no idea how right he was.

Line break

And that's a wrap! Did I just have the Systems Alliance first contact be with the motherfucking drell and not the Batarians or Turians? Did I also just have the humans uplift them instead of the hanar? Thane becoming an N7 assassin? Yes I just fucking did. How's THAT for a twist?

I still need Sangheili OCs for the badass Ghosts squad! Keep the profiles coming I like what I see, so far! Remember, I need Appearance, Personality, Combat specialty, and a bio.

Codex:

Titan Drop Shock Troopers: Titan Drop Shock Troopers, or TDST, are the Systems Alliance's answer to the UNSC's ODS. TDSTs are Light Infantry designed to constantly move through the environment through the use of parkour and are quite capable of literally running on walls. Augmentations in their cardiovascular system enable them to have inhuman stamina and agility as well as the ability to pilot their specialty: Titans.

TITANS: 25 feet tall heavy mechs are dropped from orbit along with TDSTs to assist them in battle. They are made up of the same alloy that make up Alliance Ships, and are protected by energy shielding. Their main weapon of choice is a GAU-38 Hybrid Gatling Gun, which fire kinetic plasma rounds. A titan can engage in "follow" mode where it doesn't need a pilot and defend itself competently with an onboard computer system that can hold a Systems Alliance Smart AI.

N7: The assassination unit of the Alliance. N7 goes on top-secret missions to eliminate threats before they become one. They receive rigorous training in Brazil on Earth. Drell make up at least forty percent of current N7 recruits.

OMEGA: Currently nothing is known about them except they're undoubtedly the toughest soldiers in the Alliance, bar none. Their activities and training are classified beyond Top Secret.

AI: Systems Alliance AIs are used all throughout Systems Alliance space with dumb AIs being used even by civilians. Smart AIs are used exclusively by the Alliance military for cyber warfare, ship-to-ship combat, and much more.

M55 Hybrid Assault Rifle: The standard issue Assault Rifle in the Alliance. Like the MA5E it fires 7.62 rounds that are coated in plasma before they leave the barrel for devastating stopping power. It's appearance is similar to a cross between the Honey Badger and the ACR in the 21st century.

3. Silent Contact

**Mass Effect: The New Journey**

Chapter Three: Silent Contact

What's up ya'll? Bet ya didn't expect this chapter this quickly, now did you? Anyhow, we're going for a slow buildup to first contact with the Citadel races, I'm going for logical reasons and originality here! Believe me, you're going to get your wanted curbstomp (I look forward to it too), but how we get there is a matter of patience,

build up and finally, war. You guys are in for a LOT of surprises. The drell being saved by the Systems Alliance is only_ just_ the beginning.

Also, for those complaining about Chief's rank, you need to be aware of three things: 1) Fred was made an officer in canon in a battlefield promotion, so that has fuck all to do with the Chief. 2) Officers outrank enlisted PERIOD no matter what the Enlisted rank is. The fact that I have to explain this is sad and shows a distinct lack of knowledge of military culture and decorum. 3_**) Deal with it.
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(line break)

**Rakhana, Deska Region, STG scout team **

December 29**th****, 2157, Systems Alliance Standard Calendar**

A tenth STG frigate landed on the surface of Rakhana in the Deska region, one of the few territories on the desert-covered surface that hadn't been totally decimated by pollution, wars, and radiation. The dilapidated ruins of the cities that the drell had built stretched for hundreds of kilometers.

Torun Solus stepped out and casually observed his surroundings as multiple agents ran past him with a sense of urgency. He shook his head: rookies. The STG had set up several Forward Operating Bases in various regions across Rakhana, with Deska being the most prominent. Around forty percent of the entire STG was here, investigating what happened to the 11 billion inhabitants. In Torun's own opinion, forty percent was extreme overkill, but Councilor Valern, ultimately, called the shots here. Even if he didn't agree wholeheartedly, he had to have had a good reason for calling so many of his task group to a single system.

Walking into a highly specialized 'tent', he was saluted by fellow STG officers. "Do we have any current theories?" Torun already knew the conclusion they had drawn, but alas, protocol.

"Evidence inconclusive, but only one theory makes sense: this entire population was uplifted by an unknown race."

As always, Torun was right on the money. There were eleven billion people on this planet just shy of six galactic years ago. The STG checked up on them roughly every six months to see if they would settle their internal differences. Seeing as how Council law had forbidden them from interfering, citing the Krogan as the primary reason why, the intelligence group simply let them be, if not with pity. But to find out that every single one of that species simply _gone_ was simply disturbing. Torun found it _extremely_ unlikely that, one, the species had united together, two, somehow was able to achieve and discover Space Flight, three, leave this system, and four, leave no trace of their presence behind. Which could only mean

one thing: some race interfered where no one else had. It couldn't have been a council race or even a non-citadel one. The STG would've known in a heartbeat if someone were allocating resources to relocate an entire species. But that left another question:

"How did our probes not detect them?"

"I can answer that," another agent across from Torun replied, typing some commands on his omnitool. A hologram appeared on the table. It was the entire system including Rakhana. There were dozens of black dots at strategic points in a pattern in the system itself. On Rakhana, there were hundreds, if not thousands of them all over the planet. Torun's black eyes went wide in disbelief.

"Is...is that...?!"

The agent nodded solemnly. "Yes...Hawking Radiation. We're detecting it by the thousands all over the planet. Our probes were swallowed up. The only thing we could salvage was the data that detected the radiation itself. No images, audio, radio traffic, or anything. In other words..."

"Whatever species uplifted them...it's highly probable their ships leave traces of Hawking Radiation. Look here," he pointed to the black dots hundreds of thousands of kilometers away from the planet.

"Same pattern," another agent called out intrigued. "Perhaps an entry point into the system?"

"Improbable," an operative to Torun's right disagreed. "Even with our mastery of FTL, we rarely enter a system twice the same way."

"We're dealing with a lot of unknowns here. The data is right in front of us, so we have to take it at face value; no matter how much it goes against our theories. Bottom line: We're dealing with an unknown race that was not only able to uplift 11 billion primitive inhabitants, but able to do so without our knowing until after the fact. All within a few years." Now Torun saw perfectly why Valern allocated so many STG to this planet.

All of them nodded seriously. The implications were...incalculable. But no one dared spoke of them out loud.

"We'll need more data."

"Of course. We'll scan every square meter of this planet for clues. You all know what must be done. You're all dismissed."

Torun stared at the hologram as the agents dismissed themselves from the room. Those hundreds of dots just kept seemingly...staring at him...taunting him even. It almost felt as if they were daring him to figure out the mystery. His eyes narrowed in conviction.

Challenge accepted.

****December 30****th****, 2157****

****UNSC Infinity, Arcturus System****

The UNSC Infinity drifted near the outskirts of the Arcturus System, the six-kilometer long vessel still as imposing as it was when it was commissioned nearly thirty years ago. Director Xavier had tasked Infinity to oversee the creation of Arcturus station shortly after UNSC scientists had manufactured a vaccine for Kepral's syndrome. Rather than make Earth the capital, the Alliance collectively decided to have their military capital in another system, as another buffer before getting to the Home Fleet stationed in geosynchronous orbit. The station's construction wasn't exactly a secret in and of itself, but the coordinates to get to Arcturus was highly classified and would remain as such until the station was commissioned. All construction crews and equipment travelled on Alliance vessels: Halcyon-class cruisers, mostly, but sometimes full blown carriers depending on the purpose.

Arcturus was one of three major military capitals of the Systems Alliance, the other two being Earth, naturally, and Axiom Prime, the Alliance equivalent of Reach. Axiom Prime was another "super-earth" discovered in the 21st century, and was unquestionably the most developed colony in human hands, surpassing even Eden Prime. It was a military colony through and through with only about 30% of the colonists being civilians.

Aesthetically, Arcturus was essentially taking the design of an Orbital Defense Platform and upping its size by a hundred fold with a few design changes here and there. While it wasn't going to impress anyone who had seen and lived on High Charity, it was a remarkable achievement of astroengineering. The station had numerous ports, several of which could fit Infinity and the Shadow of Intent inside and still have room for frigates! The MAC guns scattered across the outer surfaces would gut a fully shielded Covenant Supercarrier in a single shot and still have power to destroy a second and cripple a third.

Admiral Lasky sipped a bit of hot cocoa, tranquility watching the Huragok work with Systems Alliance marines, drell, construction workers, and the like assemble Arcturus piece-by-piece. The station was coming along well he had to admit. The Forerunner's Huragok were godsend. They sped up the rate of ship production and pretty much anything space related dramatically. Looking to his left, he had to sigh a bit. He was running a skeleton crew and the bridge barely had a third of its occupants during normal operations. Out of the 27,000 troops and personnel Infinity arrived with in this galaxy, only about 9,000 were currently on the ship: the absolute bare minimum. The other 18,000 were scattered all over Systems Alliance space, either helping put down militia groups and rebels, missions on Earth, training Alliance Marines, wargames, teaching the Alliance UNSC doctrine and tech, along with a plethora of other things. Only one battalion of ODS was onboard, the rest were training with the TDS, naturally. Hell, even half of his Spartans were gone. Blue Team, NOBLE team, Crimson, Majestic, Avalanche, Shadow...all on some remote planet training with the OMEGAs. Of course, Richards had given them all (Spartans, ODS, Marines) fake dossiers, which Cortana and another Alliance AI helped create, so there wouldn't be any suspicion were anyone to perform a background check, way back in the day.

Lasky honestly couldn't blame them, really. Forcing all 27,000 of them stay on a single ship for 100 plus years was not a situation

he'd want to deal with. Allowing them some shore leave was the only way to relieve some of the stress that would build up. The system that was set up was sort of like a deployment in and of itself. A crewman spent six months on Infinity and then six months somewhere in Alliance space. It wasn't perfect, but it was better than the alternative.

"Feeling lonely, sir?" Roland asked as his hologram appeared on the table.

Lasky shrugged, if a bit half-heartedly. "I'm not sure, to be honest. I'm so used to this ship having thousands of people working around the clock. Now it's just...empty."

"I know. I actually have to work 10% harder now without you humans. Go figure."

The UNSC officer was about to retort when he was receiving a hail, audio only. Odd. He answered anyhow. "Systems Alliance, SSV Infinity, Admiral Thomas Lasky speaking," he answered, cryptically. The "UNSC" part of Infinity's name on the outer hull had been erased by precise lasers, similar to how tattoos were removed, and repainted with the call sign of "SSV".

"I see you've finally gotten used to saying that," a familiar voice said on the other end.

"Ah, Director Xavier. To what do I owe the pleasure?" Lasky replied cordially. The man practically bent over backwards to integrate the UNSC with the Alliance, while maintaining their independence. It was a shame he was born in this galaxy. He had the military abilities of Lord Hood with political leadership to back it up. The man kept Ishigami in line, which was more than Hood could say for Parangosky. He wasn't one to speak ill of the dead, but the former ONI head's execution was a long time coming and the UNSC was better off for it.

"I'll cut to the chase, Admiral, I think its time we showed Infinity to the public at large." Another thing he appreciated. Getting straight to the point.

"Really, now?" Of course they had made plans for this event back in the summer, but he didn't expect the timetable to be moved up so soon. If anything, he expected Infinity's unveiling to be next year.

"Yes. I've already set up a press conference for the New Year in London, where we'll unveil you to the public in the most dramatic way possible. I'll forward you details. I trust you can make it to Earth by New Years?" The question was obviously rhetorical. Infinity's Forerunner slipspace drives could reach the Alliance homeworld in half an hour ,tops, let alone two days.

Lasky smirked. "I could arrive fashionably late, you know?"

"Heh," Xavier huffed, amused. "As tempting as that is, I'd prefer you not. I'd honestly like you to depart immediately."

"Who will watch over Arcturus in our absence?"

"They should be arriving any second now."

As if on cue, a dozen slipspace ruptures opened up in front of Infinity. Six Strident-class frigates appeared first, being the smallest. Five Halcyon-class light cruisers exited slipspace next to them, the kilometer long vessels were in perfect formation, using the pinpoint accurate slipspace technology the Alliance acquired from the UNSC. Finally, in the center of the small flotilla, was a Systems Alliance carrier, its size easily dwarfing the other ships.

Carriers in the Alliance were enormous at 4.5 kilometers long. Infinity and the Separatists' three Assault Carriers were the only ships that surpassed them in sheer length and tonnage. A carrier had, on average, 1000 F/A-50 Rapier Fighters that could launch at a moments notice along with thousands of TDST and Titan mechs. Ten feet of Titanium-A3 protected its hull in addition to some of the toughest shielding in Alliance space. Its MAC gun was unique in the fact that it could do something even the Infinity, at present, couldn't do: it could change the mass of its MAC rounds. Taking the advice of Rtas, Alliance ships had an Element Zero core mainly inside the barrel of the main gun. The ship's commander could increase or lower the mass of each individual MAC round at will, allowing for devastating results in space combat.

Increasing the mass at to its maximum, obviously, drew more power from the engines as it took more time to fire and hit its target. However, when it did hit said target, the results were nothing short of jaw dropping. There wasn't a single ship that wouldn't be split in half, if not outright obliterated on impact. On the flip side, if the commander wanted some "suppressive fire" in space, so to speak, he'd ask the crew to lower the mass of the MAC round to whatever he wished, depending on the situation. This allowed the MAC gun to be fired rapidly, with the reload time being negligible. Of course, the lowered mass allowed for...less than impressive stopping power, but it definitely had its uses! To explain the system more concretely to the average joe, Alliance scientists who built the hybrid system put it this way: the lowered mass MAC rounds would be the equivalent of a UNSC DMR in space, rapidly firing its ammo semi-automatically, before it has to be 'reloaded' (or in this case the salvo being replenished by the ships internal factory). The higher mass Magnetic Weapon would be the equivalent of the UNSC Sniper Rifle in space, except with a dramatically longer reload time. It was dumbing it down, sure, but it was explained in a way that everyone could understand.

The introduction of Element Zero into ship based weapons opened up entirely new doctrines, strategies, and tactics for space warfare. Archer missiles could travel exponentially faster to their targets at massively ultrasonic speeds and individual Jericho missiles could hold even more miniature-missiles as lowered mass meant the engines could do much more. According to Cortana, if the Systems Alliance were to invade UEG territory right now, with having the best of UNSC and Mass Effect tech, not even Infinity could stop the UNSC from getting completely dominated. However, that being said, Infinity itself had a few tricks up her sleeve, with several eezo cores throughout the ships. Retrofitting eezo was a lot harder on existing ships, than ones built with it from the ground up. Lasky still kept Infinity's energy projectors and SUPERNOVA warheads a closely guarded secret. He'd hate to have to use them on the Alliance, but if it ever came down to it, he'd destroy the Sol System without hesitation.

"Oh, wow. A carrier, eh? Do theyâ€"

"Yes. They've already been briefed about, Infinity. To them, you're just an Admiral who got lucky and was put in charge of the Alliance's best ship."

Lasky nodded. "I see. Very well, then. I'll be on my way as soon as I debrief them on the current situation."

"Good. Any questions before I go?"

Lasky opened his mouth to say no, but then paused. "Actually...yes. I do. Director, can you at least give me an update on Blue Team and OMEGA? Haven't heard from them in a while."

If this were a videoconference, Lasky would've seen the black man smile. Xavier had to ****admire**** the Admiral. Even though they were super soldiers capable of inhuman feats, Lasky still cared about their well-being. "They're fine, Admiral. Trust me. I'll have Commander-117 contact you at his earliest convenience if it'll make you feel better."

"It would," he told him honestly.

"I look forward to your return to Earth. Xavier, out."

The connection was cut off immediately. After debriefing the replacement team, Roland prepped all hands for a jump. The engines roared to life and Infinity vanished in the eleven dimensions of slipspace not a second later on their way to Earth.

****Earth, Rio de Janeiro ****

****New Years Eve, 2157 ****

Thane Krios oversaw the jungles of Rio de Janeiro, overlooking an enemy rebel base over a cliff, in a prone position. Bastards were clever, trying to hide in plain sight, but the drell knew better. Dozens of civilian vehicles that he knew from experience were military grade. The drell scanned more of the buildings and surrounding area with his VISR 5.0. Many entrances, but not a whole lot of exit options once they completed their objective: assassinate a rebel leader and get out, quickly, and quietly if possible.

The N7 assassin was so concentrated he nearly let his guard down when he felt a presence behind him. Alarmed, he turned on his back and drew his pistol and almost fired it until he saw who it was. He groaned. "Dammit, Kai! Are you trying to give me a heart attack?"

For as long as he could remember Thane and Kai Leng had been tight, being in the same class of N7 recruits. The two had an odd understanding of one another. Thane was more of the silent type, Kai Leng was more outgoing, a bit obnoxious, and had a deadly bad boy side to him. Thane suspected that had he not befriended the human, he probably would've gotten discharged from the program. Everyone learned discipline in a plethora of different ways, he surmised.

"Sheesh, Thane, we haven't even started, yet. Chill, dude," Kai Leng put his hands up in the air defensively. "Anyhow, what do we have? Anything we should worry about?"

"Not in particular. We just don't have many exit plans or much cover. Our suits weren't designed to take as much punishment as the TDST," Thane answered simply. Kai Leng grimaced. Thane and Kai Leng had the ****AICS**** or Advanced Infiltration Combat Suit, the standard suit for N7 operatives. It was based directly on the SPI armor used by the SPARTAN-III during the Human-Covenant War. The suit came in two layers: one layer was skin-tight, form-fitting black suits that cover the wearer from the neck down. The second layer was thin bits of titanium in the form of shin guards, arm guards, thigh guards, a chest plate and a flexible titanium pair of gloves. The AICS had an active camouflage generator that provided up to five minutes of near total invisibility. It had energy shielding, but the suit was not designed for heavy assaults, like the TDST. Inside the suit's wrists were energy staves, directly copied from the Sangheili. Like all Alliance soldiers, they too had a helmet that could retract at will.

"Hmm...I see. Good thing I grabbed that thing, just in case," Kai Leng remarked, pointing to another part of the cliff. Thane blinked. It was a Sniper Rifle mounted on what seemed like a tripod used for cameras.

"Is that..?"

Kai Leng grinned and tossed him a touchscreen tablet with two handles. In the center was a ten inch screen, on the top was a radio antenna, the right handle had a trigger similar to a video game controller, while top left had an analog stick. Pressing the power button, a crosshair was seen on the screen...of the camp. Moving the analog stick to the left, to his amazement, the sniper rifle moved on its own to the left. Moving the stick to the right, the sniper rifle mimicked it instantaneously in a 1:1 ratio.

"SN-90 Hybrid Remote Sniper Rifle system. Wherever you aim on the screen and press the trigger, the rifle will fire instantaneously. Should be able to cover our exit, don't you think?"

Thane smirked at the Chinese N7 agent and put the tablet away. They both looked at the horizon. The sun was starting to set. "We need to move or we'll miss our window."

"Agreed," Kai Leng replied, grabbing both his katana and sheathing them. Thane checked his blade that was on his back to for a final inspection. All N7 were trained in the art of kenjutsu, Japanese sword arts, per the orders of Admiral Ishigami. Their blades were sharpened with 22nd century technology and with a press of a button, the steel would be coated with superheated plasma stabilized by magnetic fields. It was essentially the same technology used by the Sangheili's energy swords, except it was the shape of a katana, kodachi, or wakizashi, depending on personal preference of the operative. While there hasn't been a single N7 operative who has been able to best a Sangheili in a sword match, they were able to hold their own well enough.

Taking out their MP21-Valk, the two operatives leapt of the cliff, and slid down, riding the underside, dust kicking up behind them.

With a front flip near the end of the sliding, they three point landed on the ground. With their free hand they scanned for targets.

"Clear left."

"Clear right."

Both stood up and moved in the jungle, careful of their surroundings. One of the very first lessons taught by their instructors was to never rely on technology. VISR 5.0 was a phenomenal piece of software, but it wasn't perfect. Not by a long shot. It was your instincts, skills, and ingenuity that kept you alive behind enemy lines. They saw two guards talking, holding primitive AK-100s, the last rifle to be made in the AK family some sixty years ago.

"I'll take left," said Kai Leng declared.

Thane nodded. Raising both their Valks, they each shot a silenced round in both their skulls with precision marksmanship. Both went down without a fight. "Beautiful." Grabbing a leg, Thane dragged one of the bodies into a remote area nearby with tons of vegetation. Kai Leng did the same with his kill in an area perpendicular.

This continued for the next ten minutes as Kai Leng and Thane made their way to the base. They'd kill guards, hide the bodies, scan for hostiles, and repeat the process. They finally came up to a fence.

Thane drew his kodachi and encoded it with plasma. With a few slices, he cut through the steel fence like it was hot butter. He spun it and sheathed it not a second later, the sheath automatically deactivating the plasma. Thane had to give the humans credit. They thought of everything when it came to their equipment.

"Place is crawling with guards...I don't think the both of us can get in. We're gonna need a distraction." The drell smiled at his partner knowingly.

"_Great_...so I'm the bait?" Kai Leng grunted, not really looking forward to it.

"If you want," Thane smirked, knowing he was practically ordering him to do so. "Drinks are on me when this is over," he offered.

"Throw in a massage from a hot Brazilian lady and you got yourself a deal!"

Thane laughed a bit. "Okay, deal."

Kai Leng gave him a mock salute and activated his camouflage, vanishing. What the N7 assassin was up to was anyone's guess. That thought pushed aside, Thane turned on active camo and went to work. He snuck up behind another guard on the side of the building and stabbed him with an energy stave. He was gone before the corpse even fell on the ground. There was an open window. The drell instantly dove through landing in a barrel roll. A bathroom. A small one at that. He felt a bit claustrophobic, but paid it no mind.

Slowly, he turned the knob of the door slowly to test for any excess

noise. Just his luck they'd use old school bathroom doors. Aiming his Valk he found that the coast was clear...for now at least. Seeing a need to conserve power, he deactivated his active camo, not needing it for the moment. This building was old and dilapidated, devoid of the technological wonders he was used to. He checked his map. Target was about a hundred meters inside. All right now to flush him out and thenâ€"!

Thane didn't get a chance to finish his mental game plan as the ground vibrated in a shockwave knocking him off his feet. He rolled into a dark corner and activated his camo. '_What the fuck was that?!_' Bringing out the touchpad that controlled the Remote Sniper, he got his answer as he saw through the scope on the screen. Kai Leng. Crazy son of a bitch. He asked for a distraction, not a goddamn wake up for all of Rio!

"Kai! Don't you think that's a bit overdoing it?"

"Sorry...Thane...kind of...busy here!" There were multiple gunshots ringing over the radio along with slices from his dual energy katana. Dozens of rebels were pouring out of the building keen on taking his N7 partner out, who was using his active camo and mastery of kenjutsu to cause chaos. Even Kai Leng had his limits. Besides, this was a perfect opportunity to test out this new toy.

Zooming on a moving target on the screen, Thane pressed the trigger on the controller pad. The Remote Sniper rifle, kilometers away, instantaneously fired a hybrid 14.5x114mm plasma coated round. Even Thane had to wince a bit as the round tore through the rebel's jugular vein, went through the windshield of a car and embedded itself in the wall. Washing away his mild discomfort, Thane picked multiple targets and timed them all perfectly: six shots, six kills.

"Thane! Target is on the move outside! I'm engaging to intercept! Cover me!"

Kai Leng hopped over a fence and sprinted after his target, Thane covering him with the Remote Sniper as he asked. The rebel leader was headed for a Pelican dropship, no doubt stolen from its manufacturer. The engines were roaring to life as the pilot was making pre-fight checks in haste. The drell put an end to that by putting bullet through his head...well, multiple ones that is. Cockpit glass was tough to break even with hybrid rounds. With nowhere to run, the rebel leader was completely defenseless. Kai Leng appeared behind him, and stabbed him in his spinal column, the blade coming out of his chest.

****GAME OVER****

The 'rebel leader' vanished into particles and the jungles of Rio faded into the background, revealing a dull grey room ten times the size of the S-deck on Infinity. It was a simulation room. Thane strolled up to Kai Leng who was sheathing both his swords.

"You're one crazy son of a bitch, you know that Kai?" Thane told him shaking his head. "I go in the building, you're the distraction, and you get the kill anyway." Thane wasn't jealous or even upset; he was just amused at the irony of the entire outcome.

"Heh, how about that?"

"Leng! Krios!"

Both Kai Leng and Thane immediately went to attention, recognizing that voice anywhere: Admiral Ishigami. She entered the simulation room with two OAI agents, both of whom, coincidentally enough, were drell, dressed in Alliance blues. The 5'10" Admiral was a striking woman, but both N7 recruits knew behind her frameless glasses she was cutthroat and could have them killed in heartbeat were they to step out of line.

"Admiral Ishigami, ma'am!" Both saluted. The Japanese woman returned their salutes sharply, dropped it, and gave them a warm smile. A chill went down Kai Leng's spine. _Jesus Christ_! Even when the woman was being genuinely friendly she was scary.

"Fine work out there, gentlemen," she complemented, before gazing around. "Even if it was a bit..._explosive_ for my tastes." She was only met with nervous laughter. "Anyhow, you've proven your worth. Congratulations. Welcome to N7."

"Oh, hell yeah!" Kai Leng exclaimed, before inwardly panicking. "I mean, thank you ma'am Iâ€"

"It's fine, Agent Leng," Ishigami replied, rolling her eyes. The Admiral's two drell bodyguards each pinned an "N7" insignia on their right breastplates. She gave them a final salute, which they return. "Both of you have ten days of shore leave until you receive your assignment. You've earned it."

"Understood, ma'am." Ten days of leave after nearly fourteen months of hell and sixteen hour training days? Damn right they deserved it.

"I also believe there's some people here to see you two." Ishigami gestured behind her. Two figures stood with shit-eating grins on their faces: A brand new Lieutenant Tyson Greystone and Sergeant Tarius Krios, dressed in civilian attire.

"Tyson? Tarius?" Thane blinked, not expecting them to be here at all!

"I'll leave you four." Admiral Ishigami exited the room, subtly noticing the Lieutenant's lusting eyes toward her. She allowed herself a small smirk. That knowledge would definitely come in handy in the future. She exited the simulation room.

"_Damn_ Tarius. I swear if she wasn't a Flag Officer..."

"Shut the hell up, Ty," Tarius laughed, shaking his head.

"Tyson! Dude! It's been too long!" Kai Leng told the TDST, giving him some brotherly love, which was returned wholeheartedly. "Lieutenant already? They sure promote fast in the TDST."

"It's just cause I'm _that_ badass," Tyson replied, grinning.

"I'm sure," Thane shook his head, not believing him for a second.

"How'd you know we were taking our final evaluation?"

"Being a TDST has its...perks," Tarius replied cryptically.

"So...Thane...you did promise drinks were on you AND you owe me a massage from a Brazilian lady!"

"Massage?" Both TDST pilots' faces traced confusion.

"Ugh. It's a long story."

Tarius put his hand on his brother's shoulders and grinned. "You can tell us _all_ about it over dinner. We got plenty of time."

Nodding, all four friends departed the training deck and headed towards downtown Rio. Thane looked at his N7 emblem. He couldn't _wait_ to see what kind of action he'd see in his career.

(line break)

****London, United Kingdom ****

****New Years Day, 2158 SSV Infinity's "Commissioning" ceremony****

In the heart of the capital of the United Kingdom there was a buzz of activity. Director Xavier had invited reporters and officers from all over the Systems Alliance for a special announcement. Knowing the Director's personality, they knew it had to be something huge. There was a gathering outside a large patio where thousands of people had gathered. At the top were the Alliance Chiefs, along with the Sangheili Iassa 'Sadum, the Shipmaster of the Flagship of Earth's defense fleet, _Steeple of Ascent_.

Iassa stood just as tall as her male counterparts at about 8'6", in gold and silver armor. She was a proud Sangheili and loyal to humankind to a fault, almost. Her husband was killed during the assault on Reach in 2552. At first, she harbored a deep resentment and hatred towards the humans, wanting revenge. That all changed when the Prophets betrayed the Sangheili and the truth about the Covenant came to light. She immediately discarded her faith and worked to correct the wrongs her husband, a Zealot, had made. So she became a warrior and shipmaster, no small feat considering the short amount of time she did it in. _The Servants of Abiding Truth_ came to fear her, as she was a master tactician and could command a ship with the skill of a Shipmaster with decades more experience than she. Iassa vowed that as long as she drew breath she would never abandon humanity, for they had given the Sangheili purpose again, friendship instead of hatred, and most of all, forgiveness instead of resentment.

Iassa turned her head to see Xavier walk onto the stage. She gave a nod of respect. "It's good to see you, Director."

Xavier waved her off. "Come on, Iassa, don't be like that. You know I hate formalities with you."

"Sorry," she apologized. "It has become a habit." She looked towards the skyline. London truly was beautiful. She never got to come to the surface much due to being on the _Ascent_ above Earth. "So...how does Admiral Lasky plan to reveal himself?"

"Oh, you'll see," Xavier smirked and went up to the mic, getting everyone's attention. "Ladies, Gentlemen, and all species under the banner of the Systems Alliance, thank you all for coming today for such an extraordinary event. Just a mere decade ago, humanity discovered it as not alone in the universe. Just a mere decade ago, our technological achievements of today we're merely pipe dreams. A decade ago humanity was confined to one world! No more. We met our Sangheili allies, who came to us in peace and showed us wonders we couldn't have imagined. Through their alliance and guidance, they united Humanity and the Systems Alliance grew stronger!" There was heavy applause.

"For a decade we've built our military strength. Building ship after ship, weapon after weapon, we have prepared for the unknown. Humanity will want peace, but will not hesitate to go to war. Today, I'm here to unveil a vessel that we have kept the utmost of secret...until today." Murmurs started to work through the crowd as they were quietly making their own speculations of what kind of vessel the Director could be talking about.

"This ship is the largest vessel ever created by Systems Alliance," Xavier told them. '_For now,' _he added in his own head. "Designed with all of the latest and greatest of technologies discovered over the past decade. Home to over 27,000 of our best and our brightest." That got the attention of practically everyone. It was common knowledge that Alliance Carriers more or less a crew of 13,000. To hear the Alliance had built a ship that held more than _double_ that was insanity! "If you all would please turn you attention to the Thames."

Over the Thames River, a giant slipspace portal opened. An enormous black ship pushed its way through, its four Series-8 MAC guns in full view. The Infinity was making a slipspace jump in atmosphere with negligible, if not outright insignificant effects on the area surrounding it. The only Alliance ships that attempted such a feat were ships below Halcyon-class. Infinity was so enormous that it casted a gigantic shadow over downtown London and yet she still hadn't finished entering normal space! Xavier had to laugh not be able help himself. Every single one of their jaws was completely on the floor, their eyes as wide as saucers. Some had even dropped what they were holding in their hands.

"I present to you all: The _SSV Infinity_!"

(line break)

Timeline:

_January 2__nd__, 2158: The unveiling of the SSV Infinity is considered a massive success, boosting morale and curiosity across the entire Systems Alliance. Infinity is stationed at the military colony of Axiom Prime, along with the Shadow of Intent. _

_January 11__th__, 2158: Thane Krios and Kai Leng are assigned to the N7 operations on Shanxi_

_February 2158: Reports are growing of children exposed to element zero exhibiting strange powers. Xavier authorizes the Alliance to find a way to potentially weaponize it. Preliminary reports are

inconclusive but the investigation is still ongoing. _

_May 12__th__, 2158: The Alliance completes construction of its 500__th__ combat warship. The combined manpower of the Alliance Military to include reserves is well over 50 million with the number expected to triple in the next twenty to thirty years. _

_June 2158: The Alliance begins training a second class of OMEGA supersoldiers. The Program is still classified above Top Secret.

_

_July 2158: Loosely based on the Covenant Scarab, the Systems Alliance builds the Mobile Artillery Walker/Long Range or MAWLR.

_

_September 2158: Alliance engineers start drawing up plans for Project Daedalus, Project Atlas, and Project Olympus: A second Infinity-class capital warship, a dreadnought class warship, and a Super carrier, respectively. All three are expected to enter service by 2170 at the latest. _

December 2158: Arcturus Station is finally finished after years of construction. The Sangheili Baptism of Fire serves as the Flagship of its fleet. The Alliance Parliament is permanently moved to the base and becomes the de-facto capital of humanity

February 2160: The Office of Alliance Intelligence finds evidence of another galactic civilization, near the Skyllian Verge. All expansion into the system is halted temporarily.

Line break

****Skyllian Verge, OAI Flagship SSV **_**Amaterasu**_**

****March 15****th****, 2160****

On board the frigate sized, SSV Amaterasu, were some of the greatest officers and enlisted personnel in the entire Office of Alliance Intelligence. It was the crown jewel of the intelligence organization and Admiral Ishigami's personal flagship. The ship was painted jet black like ONI prowlers and covered in a material that made the ship virtually undetectable.

"What are we looking at Izanagi?" Ishigami asked the Amaterasu's smart AI. His hologram appeared on her chair. True to his name, he looked exactly like the character from Japanese mythology.

"Undeniable ma'am. There's a trace of Element Zero all over the system. It sure as hell wasn't from us, that's for sure. Which could only mean..."

"We're not the only ones looking for a new colony." While it was true detecting eezo in and of itself, didn't confirm anything, but the difference between unrefined element zero and eezo a ship leaked off was massive to the point where you literally _couldn't_ mistake one for the other. Outside of some stealth ships used to scout new systems, there hadn't been a single SA ship to pass through the Skyllian Verge.

"All right, everyone. Listen up. We're going in."

That got her shocked looks from her entire crew. "...Ma'am, are you sure we canâ€" "

Ishigami glared at him, shutting him up. "Listen. All of you. We don't know if this civilization is hostile or not. Our job is to protect the Alliance from the shadows and we can't do that by being cowards. We all swore an oath that we'd give our lives to give the Systems Alliance a fighting chance should we gather intelligence on hostile alien species. The same principle applies here. We move in, gather as much intel as we can, and report back to..." she scoffed derisively. "...Director Xavier." She respected the man, truly, but her inability to manipulate him always unnerved her.

"Am I understood?" She was met with several nods. "Then take us through."

The Amaterasu's engines roared to life and sailed deeper into uncharted territory. Ishigami only prayed whatever species they found they'd be non-hostile.

Line Break

And that's a wrap! I was going to go a bit longer, but eh, I felt this was a good place to stop, honestly.

Yes, Kai Leng is different from he is in the game. Cerberus doesn't exist yet, so I'm kind of writing his character in a fall from grace tragedy type of way.

No Codex for this chapter, unfortunately!

Hope you all look forward to the next update!

4. Third Contact

Mass Effect: The New Journey

****Chapter Four****: _Third Contact_

Yo! All right sorry for getting this chapter up a bit late. Real life intervened and prevented me from doing my planned schedule of updating once a week. So, instead of that, to give me some more breathing room, I'm going to be updating this fic every two weeks and bar some mega shit going down on my end, I'll try my best to keep up with that schedule.

Some of you are wondering exactly how the Systems Alliance gained its footing so fast and whatnot, so I'm going to go into detail explaining just how, if only to get some of you to stop bitching at me not explaining every little thing.

By the way, another thing people are asking, "Why would the Salarians call it Hawking Radiation." Because it's called translation convention, holy fucking shit. They're obviously speaking their own native tongue in-story, but to YOU the reader, it's in English for your convenience. You really thought I was just going to make up some bullshit word in the Salarian language, just so I'd avoid using a

human term, when the human term makes more sense and everyone would get what I'm trying to convey? Do you have any idea how stupid that would be? The fact that I have to explain this is, quite frankly, sad and pathetic.

Oh, and for those who submitted Ghosts OCs, thank you! All four will be showing up in this chapter! :D

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* * *

><p>Rakhana, Deska region, STG Forward Operating Base

March 17**th****, 2160 **

Torun slammed his fist on the table inside the STG FOB in complete and total frustration, knocking some tablets and computers on the ground. The Salarian cared very little that the tablets had shattered on impact: they could be replaced easily and its not like they had any data he didn't already know himself.

Two years. For nearly two damn years he had traveled all over Rakhana looking for evidence and clues to the whereabouts of that species and those who had uplifted them. He had tried to remain composed in the face of adversity, but this was beginning to wear on his patience.

"Sir, are you well?" an agent who had just strolled in asked, his tone calm, but his eyes betraying the underlying sympathy and mutual agreement of being annoyed at coming up empty-handed.

Torun sighed. "I...I...no," he finally admitted. "This entire mystery is upsetting me. I'm frustrated. I'm making mistakes. Too many. We're no closer to finding out the truth than we were years ago. It's...unsettling."

"I agree. Might I make a suggestion, sir?"

Torun raised the Salarian equivalent of a human eyebrow, his interest piqued. "Oh?"

"Well, you haven't been back to Citadel space in months. Perhaps you should call your son. I'm sure he's dying to tell you about his latest invention."

Torun gave the STG agent a small serene smile. Mordin, his son, was truly brilliant, even by Salarian standards. He wasn't even ten years of age and he was already taking apart various weapons, gadgets, electronics, and the like and improving upon them exponentially. As much as Torun hated to admit it, Mordin thought outside the box, challenging ways the Citadel races did things, technologically, economically, militarily, and sometimes even politically. He doubted the majority of his suggestions would be taken to heart, but it was worth noting nonetheless. Perhaps he would call him. It'd be a

welcome distraction.

"You know? That might not be such a bad idea at all." He gave him some equipment and a COM headset. "Here. I'll probably be gone for an hour. Don't contact me unless it's vitally important." The STG agent gave a salute, understanding his orders. He left without a second thought.

Retreating back to his quarters near the back of the FOB, Torun shut the door behind him and activated his Omni-tool to begin setting up a call to his son on Sur'Kesh. On paper, the STG weren't allowed to use the intelligence agency's portable com buoys for personal endeavors, but the rule was rarely, if ever, enforced. Knowing that it would take some time for the vidconference to set up, he took some time to tidy up his quarters a bit as it was a bit messy from all of the information scattered across the room. Couldn't have Mordin think he was a hypocrite with his strict rules on cleanliness back home.

"Father!" he heard a voice while setting an ornate piece on the dresser. He turned and smiled seeing a young Mordin' grinning ear-to-ear, seeing his father. A prodigy he may have been, but the Salarian was still a child when all was said and done. He wasn't going to rob him of that.

"Ah, Mordin, it's been awhile hasn't it, son?" There was a trace of guilt laced in his voice. He was devoted to his species, but he yearned to be with Mordin, to nurture and groom his potential.

"Oh. Yes. Yes. A long time. Much too long in fact. Been missing you great deal. Invented many things to pass time by." That was another thing that set his son apart from other Salarians his age. He had a motor mouth and talked ridiculously fast, sometimes even worst when he was explaining something he was passionate about.

"As have I," Torun replied evenly. "So, tell me, what have you been up too since I last called?"

"Oh, nothing much. Quantum physics. Biomedical research. Galactic Political Science. Basics. Almost bored with it. Need something new. Exciting perhaps." Torun resisted the urge to roll his dark eyes. Only Mordin would find Quantum physics unchallenging and boring.

"What? No new inventions?"

"Inventions? No. No. No. Simply research. Can't build anything without proper knowledge first. Lots of theories. More tests. Dismissive of some, not all."

Torun smirked. "So the great Mordin Solus is stumped?"

Mordin's jaw actually dropped in defiance. "I...no! I'm just in...a phase! Yes. Yes! Phase!"

"I'm sure," came the sardonic reply from his father. Mordin simply gave him a small glare, which Torun found amusing.

"So...father...how goes your investigation? Well, I take?" Mordin

inquired, changing the subject out of embarrassment for his father calling his bluff.

Torun groaned, really not quite in the mood to tell him how he really felt. Then again, if he did lie, Mordin would likely call him out on it and probe him until he answered truthfully...well, as truthfully he could without causing an operational security violation. Then again, Mordin was the type of Salarian to correctly put the pieces together anyhow without him saying much of anything, so it was kind of a moot point anyway. He figured out what they were investigating on Rakhana. Even Councilor Valern was actually impressed and allowed the young one to keep that knowledge, both in consideration of his potential and the oath he swore to not tell a soul.

"No. We're no closer to finding out the truth than we were years ago," Torun admitted gravely. "Makes no sense. Traces of Hawking radiation, but no element zero to be found, except the obviously unrefined ones in the system itself." The STG had detected plenty of unrefined eezo in the system, untouched due to the species lack of spaceflight. It wasn't much of consolation prize as they needed a dedicated team to take any of it back to Citadel space. As of now, the whole system was on lockdown.

"As you know, based on our current models and theories, hawking radiation and element zero don't mix well. Well...they shouldn't, anyhow." Salarians had certainly encountered the radiation for sure, in remote parts of the galaxy, but studying it was difficult to say the least, as the science was so alien compared to eezo, which was relatively straightforward and rigid. "It makes me wonder how their ships made it here."

"Hmm..." Mordin hummed in wonder, putting a finger to his lips in deep thought. He brightened up as if an idea came to him. "Ah! Father. Wrong. Very wrong. Possibly thinking too straightforward. No adaptation."

"...What?" He replied blankly.

Mordin shook his head, seemingly disappointed. "STG. Supposedly adaptive in theory. In practice, Not so much. Too structured. Need to think more outside box."

"Mordin..." Torun's tone was warningly.

"Perhaps, you're going about it the wrong way," Mordin continued on as if he was completely oblivious to his father's warning tone. "Have you considered, maybe their ships don't run on element zero? Perhaps, this species' ships aren't giving it off as a byproduct of their method of their ships, but _directly because _of their way of FTL?"

Torun was stunned. Not only because of that possibility he hadn't considered, but Mordin had actually wasn't being a motor mouth. The ten-year-old continued. "Who knows? Are we assuming they all came willingly? No remnants of war? Subjugation? Evidence of orbital strikes?"

Torun's eyes widened a bit as multitudes of flashbacks came to him. "Hold on, Mordin," he told his son hurriedly, getting a nod in return even though his face was traced with confusion at the sudden switch

of emotion. The elder Salarian was practically tearing apart the room for whatever he was looking for. Mordin was greeted with a shriek of happiness from his father. He saw him insert something into his omnitool, and a projection of Rakhana's home system came up. It was the old projection he was greeted with years ago when the Special Task Group deployed him.

His eyes scanned the 3D images with far more intense scrutiny than ever before. He looked out several million kilometers outside of Rakhana's natural satellite where there large concentrations of Hawking Radiation. '_Directly because of the way of their FTL'. _Mordin's words continued to echo in his mind. "Wait a minute..."

He stared at the dots and zoomed in for a closer look. They seemed to be...distributed..._evenly_. He then looked back at some of the dots near the planets surface. Could it be...? He had to know for sure. He used his Omnitool to run some complicated numbers, writing them down as well on a pad. Checking again and then re-checking, the numbers confirmed it: the amount of radiation was exactly the same based on his calculations. Looking back towards the hologram, his eyes widened. If what he just found was even half-way correct, then..._oh dear_. The radiation wasn't indeed a byproduct like his son had said; it literally WAS their method of FTL! Which meant they traveled the stars through some type of black hole or warp space. The evenly distributed radiation...no trace of element zero...it all made sense! He and the rest of the agents were operating under the assumption that the unknown species were using traces of unknown Prothean technology. He gritted his teeth at his own shortsightedness and stupidity.

"Mordin, I'm sorry to cut this short, but I have to go, I promise to make it up to you, but you've no idea how helpful you been!" It honestly broke his heart to see his son's saddened expression. Torun knew that the young Salarian probably felt used, even if it was unintentional.

"I understand, father," Mordin bitterly choked out. He cut the connection before Torun could get another word in.

With a reluctant sigh, the STG agent pushed thoughts of his heartbroken son out of his mind, temporarily. He had a job to do.

He activated his COM systems and talked over the radio giving orders. "To all STG agents on this channel, I need a frigate to my location ASAP!" He didn't even bother waiting for a reply. He gathered his things, and downloaded as much data as he could. Staring back at the monitor where he talked to Mordin, he gave a solemn grimace. Torun left the room without incident.

True to his orders, there was an STG frigate waiting for him. The STG agent didn't waste any time boarding. Every other agent didn't even inquire as to why he wanted it.

"Take us to this area," he ordered to the crew pointing to a subsection of the Deska region, which had high traces of Hawking Radiation.

"Sir...?" they asked questioningly.

"Just do it," he growled. "We might be on the verge of solving

this!"

Not needing to be told twice, the crew sped the small ship in atmosphere at near top speed to get there as safely as possible. Torun was internally in a state of turmoil. If his hunch was correct, then the Council as a whole needed to be informed at the earliest convenience. If these beings traveled through wormholesâ€”the exact method of how he was completely cluelessâ€”as his data suggested, then that could possibly mean that travel through the Mass Relays were neglected if not outright ignored. Unlikely, but a prospect he couldn't dismiss just yet. If so, this species had an utterly massive strategic advantage over the Citadel. Tactically, the implications were unknown until it was directly seen in action. Either way, this mission just got a lot more complicated.

"Sir, what exactly are we looking for?"

"We're looking for evidence of orbital strikes."

"Why wouldâ€”"

"There! Stop!" Torun interjected staring at a crater embedded into the planet. It was two kilometers wide and several hundred meters deep.

"There are craters like this over the planet, sir. What makes this one so special?"

The agent had a point. There were thousands of craters all over Rakhana formed by war and the shifting of the tectonic plates beneath the surface of the crust. The Special Task Group found them nothing more than natural wonders at best and insignificant at worst. Torun, however, ignored his flippant comment and checked his data. This area had a history of a large concentration of Hawking Radiation that was detected years ago.

"Scan the crater for any materials. Specifically metal that could be used and slugged at relativistic speeds."

Although perplexed by the order, the agents did so without question. They all blinked in surprise. "Wow...that crater is filled with thousands of pieces of ferric and tungsten."

"Is that so? What's the total weight of the all the pieces that have been scanned?"

More presses on the console. "Although we can't be 100% accurate, preliminary scans show total weight at around...600 tons."

Torun blinked repeatedly in shock. 600 tons?! That was thousands of times the weight of even dreadnought class Mass Accelerator Cannon rounds. Now granted, the STG as early as five years ago had experimented with rounds that weighed orders of magnitude more (mostly topping out at 50 tons, deemed impractical), this was utterly ludicrous.

"My fellow agents, I do believe we may have stumbled on a discovery that will shake the galaxy."

* * *

><p>OMEGA Training World, Codename "ARCHON", Eris System, 60 Parsecs from Axiom Prime

****March 19****th****, 2160****

The Marathon-class cruiser, SSV Midnight Whisperer, made a precise slipspace jump into the highly classified Eris System. Eris was 60 Parsecs from the nearest Alliance colony, the military capital, Axiom Prime. There were 15 planets in Eris and all but one of them could support life: Archon, the 6th Planet from the star. Its biosphere was extremely diverse, comparable to Earth, but conditions were harsh, and just about every living creature on the planet seemingly wanted to eat and kill humans. Thus it was considerably a terrible planet for colonization with heavy and costly terraforming. Those funds could be used to expand humanity's growing empire and influence. However, the world was far from useless. Not only were there multiple facilities that housed the Alliance's bleeding edge Research and Development, but the planet was used to train the System's Alliance's best soldiers: the OMEGA corps.

"Jump successful, Admiral. We're drifting..."

Admiral Ashdown gave a curt nod. "Good work," the American-born admiral complemented. "Are all of our weapons cold?" he inquired, putting emphasis on "all".

The technician nodded. "Yes, sir. MAC gun is offline, Plasma torpedo reactors are dead, and for extra measure all missile pods have been completely unloaded."

"Good, take us in," Admiral Ashdown ordered. Under routine Alliance regulations, while it was perfectly fine for a commander to keep some weapons 'cool' to conserve power, it was ****never**** acceptable for a combat ship to have all weapons powered down, no matter the circumstance. Not even the Home Fleet, arguably the most secure planet in Alliance hands, could afford that luxury.

Archon, being completely unknown to 99.999% of the Alliance military, had far different regulations. The planet was protected by dozens of Strategic Defense Platforms, or SDPs. They were more streamlined versions of Orbital Defense Platforms at 3.5 kilometers tall, and looked more like long futuristic satellites than a space station. A network of Dumb A.I controlled the SDPs. Their programming was solely dedicated to the defense of Archon and all of its denizens. All ships coming anywhere near the planet had to have every single weapon powered down to its lowest level, if not completely offline. Any ship that had even one hot Archer or Jericho pod, the SDPs would fill the void of space with Super-MAC rounds, one after the other, annihilating the ship from existence with extreme prejudice. The thinking went that if any ship had a hot weapon, then it was assumed to be hostile, non-friendly, and it didn't have proper clearance to be here in the first place. Although Archon officially didn't exist, the Systems Alliance took no chances, in case it was discovered. Not even the Infinity was exempt from this requirement.

The SDPs had absolutely no humans on board. In fact, the inside of an SDP didn't even have a breathable atmosphere. The only time humans went on board were for maintenance, heavy repair, and software and hardware upgrades. The AIs handled the rest.

As the _Midnight Whisperer_ drifted passed Archon's two natural satellites, the dozens of SD Platforms came into view. Admiral Ashdown gave a smile: he'd never tire of seeing just how far humanity had come since the UNSC had practically, for lack of a better term, given them advanced tech.

"Admiral, we're being hailed."

"On-screen."

A familiar face was projected on the holotable of the _Whisperer_. "Ah! Admiral Ashdown my friend! You finally arrive!" The Russian accent was thick.

Ashdown had to chuckle a bit. "Good to see you too, General." Ashdown wouldn't lie. General Dragovich's enthusiasm was infectious. Guy never seemed to have down day. It sure as hell beat dealing with Ishigami. _'Fucking bitch,_' he thought to himself distastefully. He honestly found the woman insufferable, even if she did do her job extremely well. How the Director dealt with her on a daily basis was something he'd never fully comprehend.

"I take it you're ready to deliver the packages? I'm eager to see how big the gap in skill truly is."

"Don't worry, they're all well prepared," Ashdown replied evenly.

"Then tell them to drop in."

Ashdown nodded and was about to cut off the connection before the General added, "Oh, and by the way, Lieutenant Greystone and his squad will be dropping...elsewhere..." he remarked cryptically.

Ashdown raised an eyebrow. "Elsewhere? Why the Lieutenant?"

"I've read his file," Dragovich retorted, taking a puff of his cigar. "The kid's young, but he has massive potential, and I intend to fully bring it out. The Ghosts wanted to test their skills as well, so I chose Greystone and his small platoon of TDST."

Ashdown's eyes widened, while the rest of the bridge was confused. "The Ghosts?! Has your time on Archon made you go batshit insane!? You want to pit the Ghosts against a mere _TDST _team?! It'll be an outright massacre!" While the TDST were absolutely _exceptional_ soldiersâ€"anyone who tried to argue otherwise was suffering from severe delusionsâ€"the Sangheili Ghost squad was...a chill went down his spine.

Meanwhile, the General kept a stone face, cool as a cucumber. "Since when were you under the impression that I expected them to _win. _No, I want to see what they're willing to do to survive, nothing more. Nothing less."

With a reluctant sigh, the Chief of Naval Operations gave his consent. With an exchange of farewells, he terminated the connection. One crewman had the nerve to ask what was on everyone's mind.

"Who are the Ghosts?"

* * *

><p>SSV Midnight Whisperer, Titan Deployment
Hangar

March 19**th****, 2160 **

Deep within the bowels of the Midnight Whisperer, hundreds of Titan Drop Shock Troopers were arming themselves to the tee. Out of the hundreds of thousands of TDST that were stationed all over Alliance space, these were the cream of the crop, elite-of-the-elite. The vast majority of them had been with the TDST since they were first deployed on Eden Prime eight years ago, while others were simply exceptional in their own right scoring high-marks and graduating Titan Academy on Axiom Prime, with distinguished honors. There were a mixture of humans and drell at a 2:1 ratio in favor of the humans.

Throughout the deployment bay, a plethora of Ogres, Stryders, and Atlas class Titans were being moved into their drop pods by cranes built into the inner walls of the heavy cruiser. Titan Drop Shock Troopers had a choice of three types of Titans to pilot: the Ogre, the Stryder, and the Atlas. The Ogre was the first Titan developed by Hammond Industries ten years ago. The Ogre was designed for being extremely tough, heavily armored, and had energy shielding equivalent to the smallest Systems Alliance ships. Bulky and tall, the purpose of the Ogre was holding key choke points and heavy assaults. The Stryder, on the other hand, was the exact opposite. It was built for speed, being extremely mobile, and highly maneuverable. It was built for the purpose of Hit-and-run, ambushes, and rapid deployments. This speed did come with a price. Although very fast and maneuverable, its shielding, compared to the Ogre and Atlas, was laughable and it couldn't take much punishment. Finally, the last Titan was the Atlas: a balance of speed and armor. Atlases were designed to keep pushing through enemy territory, being able to take a hit as well as dish it out.

The reason the Systems Alliance didn't just use Atlases was simple: all three Titan models complemented each other extremely well. The Stryder would land first and assault the enemy territory with a rapid siege. Then some Ogres would drop and be tasked to hold that territory. Finally, the Atlas would plunge into the fray ahead of the Ogres and assist the Stryders in taking territory, both Titan classes covering each other's backs as they switched roles depending on the situation. While every Titan Pilot had their own preferred Titan of course, all TDST were trained to use all three proficiently.

Colonel Antonio Velázquez stepped up on a balcony overlooking his small battalion of veteran TDST, the Hispanic man was already fully armed. Tyson came by him and barked out, "Squad! ATTENTION!" Instantly, every single Shock Trooper stopped what they were doing and immediately came to attention.

"Stand at ease," Colonel Velázquez ordered. "As you all probably aware, Alliance brass has ordered us to a secret planet to test our organizations ability to rapidly deploy to unknown worlds. Are we gonna disappoint them!?"

"HELL NO, SIR!" they all echoed.

"Mhmm, damn right you won't!" the colonel bellowed. "This planet is known as Archon and we don't know what we're going to be up against so be prepped for anything. Command has authorized deadly force and we're going to give it to them tenfold! We're doing this by the book people. Remember, two minutes into your drop you will have Titanfall! And then.." he paused getting COM transmission. He excused himself and put his hand to his ear and spoke, while the others waited silently.

"I understand, sir." Velázquez turned his attention back to Tyson, who was raising an eyebrow clearly interested. "Well, well, Lieutenant, it must be your lucky day!"

"My lucky day?" Tyson replied, kind of dreading where this was going.

"Yup, Admiral just issued new orders. You'll be dropping in another region of the planet with a Platoon of your choice," he informed him. The Colonel turned back to the TDST present. "All those not picked to drop with the El-Tee get your asses to your pods! We drop in five!" Every last one scrambled to make last-minute preparations, checking suits, ammo, charging weapons, and the like.

Tarius came up to his best friend. "Guess I'm first pick?" he gave Tyson a smirk.

"Duh, bro! Always!" Tyson smirked. They slapped hands stylishly. "Ride or die, right?"

"We drop together, fight together, we die together," Tarius started. "Ride or die."

"Ride or Die." Tyson fist bumped his drell best friend. "Ready to kick some ass?"

"Thought you'd never ask!"

With that being said, both drell and human went off in search for the best TDST pilots they could get their hands on. Both didn't know it, but they were going to be in for the fight of their lives, pushing each to their limit.

* * *

><p>FORTRESS Base, Airfield, OMEGA Training Facility, Archon 'capital'

March 19**th****, 2160 **

Nathan-B312 and Jorge-052, rode silently in the experimental Pegasus dropship on their way to FORTRESS base's airfield. The Pegasus was intended to replace the aging design of the Pelican. Although the two were similar in appearance, Pegasus dropships were more streamlined and slick, and much more advanced due to being designed from the ground up. The SPARTAN-III and SPARTAN-II were in their MJOLNIR Mark XI armor, except they were practically unarmed due to the fact for their particular mission, they wouldn't have their feet touch the ground the entire time.

"Ugh. Tell me why we're doing this again?" Nathan practically whined. He never once thought in his life where he didn't want to fly, but he wouldn't be able to blow shit up today!

"This is why I tell you that you should pay more attention. Sheesh. We're acting as if command can't have eyes in the sky or orbit, so we have to basically feed them intel."

"We're making it too easy for these guys."

The large SPARTAN-II gave a grin. "Who said we'd be feeding intel the OMEGAs?"

Now that caught the attention of Noble Six. "Is that so?" Okay, he took it back. This mission just got a hell of a lot more interesting. The Pegasus rotated 180 degrees on a far end of the runway and sat itself down, blowing dust as the engines cooled down. Both Spartans stepped off onto the runway to see two YSS-2000 Katana fighters being tended to by a dozen or so crew chiefs. Both state-of-the-art fighters were each about ten meters apart, perfectly parallel to each other.

Near the Katana farthest away, Six noticed two SPARTAN-IVs from Fireteam Talon, a SPARTAN-IV fireteam infamous for its abilities with aerial vehicles. "Fireteam Talon's on this mission, too?" Six grunted.

Jorge shook his head. "Can't lone wolf everything, Nathan. Sheesh." He looked at the time. "All right, missions a go, time to get down to business."

With a nod, Nathan turned serious, and both Spartans activated their helmets with a simple mental command. The crew chiefs were finished with their last minute diagnostics and saluted the super soldiers as they passed by to climb into the cockpit. Fireteam Talon did so as well, being assisted by their chiefs.

Noble Six immediately contacted the control tower even while he was strapping himself in. "K.A.D, this is Katana-1 requesting permission for takeoff," he asked, politely. Although, obviously, the Katana had VTOL capabilities, doing a conventional take off allowed for a larger build up of speed and they could reach their destination much quicker when the fighter was used in atmosphere.

"Katana-1, you are clear for takeoff, runway four," K.A.D replied. Nathan internally noted that the voice belonged to Gabriel Thorne, a SPARTAN-IV from Majestic. They must've had Tower duty for the week.

"K.A.D, also confirm rendezvous with Rapier squadron, Codename: BLACK KNIGHTs in sector Bravo Six Niner."

"Affirmative Katana-1, BLACK KNIGHTS are in the sector, they will meet you there."

This time, Paul DeMarco's voice came over the intercom. "Katana-1 and Katana-2, you have the Sky."

"Copy K.A.D, our sky."

The engines of both fighters roared to life. Barely two seconds later, both fighters sped down the runway and took off into the sky and accelerated past Mach 3, a comfortable cruise speed for in-atmosphere flying.

"K.A.D, we are rolling."

"Affirmative."

With Six's augmented vision, he could clearly see hundreds of HEVs falling out of the sky, no doubt filled with highly trained and experienced Titan Drop Shock Troopers as well as Stryders. So they were doing this by the book, eh?

Well, time to give these boys and girls some cover. They sure as hell were going to need it.

* * *

><p>Kaznan Jungle, Archon, OMEGA Training Site
44

March 19**th****, 2160 **

Tennu' Ryuum stood on a large tree branch in the dilapidated ruins of Training Site 44 or what commonly known as the Kaznan Jungle. The Sangheili stood at a height of 8'7", with jet black and bright silver armor, a large scar on his right eye and was missing a mandible. Tennu' was the leader of the Sangheili Ghost Squad, arguably the most skilled and deadly group of Sangheili in existence, in this galaxy or the next. Their combat skills easily rivaled most SPARTAN-IIs. For nearly a decade, the Ghosts and UNSC Spartans had been putting the OMEGA recruits through absolute hell on Earth. They may have been from Special Forces groups from around the globe, but that was a complete joke to the training the Ghosts and Spartans put them through. This planet's harsh conditions made the challenge even more difficult.

"Fin...report," Tennu ordered.

Elsewhere, fully cloaked and staying still as a statue, was Fin Tuyok his blue-gray eyes gazing through the scope of his beam rifle. While he certainly was not in the same league as Linda, it sure as hell didn't mean he didn't put the female SPARTAN-II through her paces when they had sniping competitions. "I have already marked several locations where the Alliance and their machines may drop." He sent the coordinates to the Ghost Leader.

Tennu couldn't help but scowl in contempt. What a waste. He hoped these TDST impressed him more they touched down, because so far, they were failing miserably. Ah, well.

"Find a new position. Keep marking."

The Sangheili Spec Ops Officer didn't even have to make that order, technically. Fin had already moved to a new location, not leaving a single trace of his presence.

Tennu's hand twitched as his eyes scanned the jungle in front of him

with rigorous fervor, as his instincts which had saved him countless times throughout the decades on the battlefield. He ducked as another Sangheili deactivated active camouflage, and tried to punch him. The strike landed on a tree and caused a dent, showing considerable strength. Tenuu kicked the Elite away, who back barreled rolled into a skid with such precision and skill that should normally be beyond most Sangheili. The other Sangheili grinned and rushed the Ghost leader at tremendous speeds. Giving the elite a grin, Tenuu engaged the enemy in what the humans called martial arts, a new form of combat adopted by the Sangheili in the early 2560s.

Having grown tired of this little spar, Tenuu activated his energy sword and held it towards the Elite's neck. "You lose, Malik," he told him.

"Don't be so arrogant, Tenuu," came the stoic reply of Malik 'Moram. Tenuu looked down and saw that Malik had activated his energy dagger in his right wrist and aimed it at his vitals.

"A tie, then," The Ghost leader said simply.

"Indeed," Malik retorted as they both slowly stepped away from each other, but fully on guard. After about five meters, both deactivated their melee weapons. Both Ghosts closed their right fists and used it to beat their chests in respect. "A worthy adversary as always, Tenuu," the hand-to-hand expert of the Ghost squad complemented.

"As are you, Malik. You've grown into a warrior that would make our ancestors proud."

"How adorable you two are," a disembodied voice echoed throughout the jungle. Both warriors snorted, recognizing it immediately. Dor'n Moramai deactivated her active camouflage and gave the elite's a grin. The Female Ghost was 8'1", wore Reach-era Spec Ops Armor, had two energy swords on each thigh and bright amber eyes.

"Dor'n...I swear you've been spending too much time around the humans, specifically the SPARTAN-IVs," Malik told the Ghost indignantly. Dor'n had an...interesting personality to say the least, which was ironic considering who her father was. She was a rebel in every sense of the word off duty, but as a warrior, her skill was tremendously invaluable.

The Ghost shook her head. "Just call it how I see it."

Malik looked toward the sky. Fifty HEV pods were heading towards Kaznan and closing in fast.

"The time to test these humans and their machine approaches. Let us make haste and prepare," Tenuu ordered. "Scatter and remember, no killing allowed. They will treat us as hostile, which makes it all the more challenging for us."

Without another word, the three Spec Ops Sangheili vanished into thin air, akin to their namesake. The Sangheili Ghosts were about to show the TDST exactly why they were so feared by the Storm Covenant.

* * *

><p>SSV Amaterasu, Skyllian Verge,

April 21**st****, 2160 **

Admiral Sayuri Ishigami ran a tired finger through her hair. She was off duty and in her private quarters onboard her flagship, the SSV Amaterasu. The Japanese woman was dressed in sweatpants and wore nothing but a bra. Feeling liberated, she relaxed, and finally got around to opening some important files General Hernandez had sent to her weeks ago, but was too busy to read.

_Warning: _

_This document, _Project Daedalus, _is property of the Systems Alliance and is classified [TOP SECRET], protected under Office of Alliance Intelligence security Protocol 1A. Disclosure of its contents, or access by, personnel with a clearance level below [TOP SECRET] is an offense punishable by courts martial and imprisonment or execution for treasonous acts. Failure to disclose confirmed or suspected breaches of security as complicity, and is punishable by dishonorable discharge and/or imprisonment. _

Directive by Director of Alliance Extraterrestrial Affairs, Miles Andre Xavier

_Sent: April 2__nd__, 2160 _

FROM: General Gabriel Ricardo Hernandez, Chief of Logistics and Exploration Corps

_TO: Admiral Sayuri Ishigami, Head of Office of Alliance Intelligence
_

_Subject: Project Daedalus _

_File Start: _

_The Systems Alliance has grown exponentially more powerful over the last decade, as you already know, Sayuri. All thanks to Admiral Lasky and his branch of humans. We wouldn't have stood a chance had they shown us hostilities. Their AI, Cortana, was able to analyze our entire economy from the bottom up and was able to come up with a system to sustain growth. Since the entire infrastructure of their civilization was already built and stood for over four hundred years. They knew the ends and outs, shortfalls, where they made mistakes, and the like. Using that knowledge is how they set up our shipyards, and the economy so it wouldn't fall prey to the same mistakes they did. Highest on that list was heavy regulated corporations and contract reform. We wrote the tax laws and contracts in such a way where there were virtually no loopholes and advantages from Day 1. That is what allowed us to expand in the short amount of time that we did. The Huragok had technology to replicate and set up shipyards and allowed us to build ship after ship. How this exactly works is still a mystery, though we certainly weren't complaining. _

_My point in all of this is that we still need to grow. I fear that there's an entire galaxy out there ready to eat us alive. Even though humanity is orders of magnitude more powerful than we were ten years ago, I still fear it may not be enough. So what I'm proposing is three ships, first starting with Project Daedalus. _

_The SSV Daedalus would be a carbon copy of the UNSC Infinity and would be the Alliances first Infinity-class capital warship. Although Admiral Lasky was a bit stingy with some details, our scientists have learned more than enough to fill in the gap.
>

Here's what we have so far for specifications:

_SSV Daedalus _

Specifications:

Class: Infinity-Class Capital Warship

Length: 6.3 kilometers

Width: 940 meters

_Engine: XR3 Boglin Fields: S91/X-DFR Hybrid Eezo Core _

_Slipspace drive: Mark X Macedon/Z _

Hull: Titanium-A3 Battle Plate (5.5 meters)

_Armament: _

_2 Series-Eight Magnetic Accelerator cannon (5 shots per charge, more if used in combination with Mass Effect fields with onboard Element Zero) _

_2 Plasma Torpedo Cores _

_750 Jericho Missile Pods (3 Missiles per Pod) _

300 Archer Missile Pods

_30 Aries Nuclear Missiles (75 Megatons) _

_900 Fortress 70mm guns _

Dorsal MAC networks, Anti-Aircraft Gun Network and Guided Missile Weapon System Network

_Complement and Crew (all subject to change at any moment): _

_1000 F/A-50 Rapier fighters (40 Squadrons) _

_D88-TC "Pegasus" Dropships (300) _

_M-15- Closed Warthogs (400)
>M909B "Mako" (300)

Naval Personnel: 5000

_Alliance Marines: 15,000
>TDST Battalions: 5

_OMEGA: 200, located on the "O-Deck" _

_Artificial Intelligence: Icarus _

_Total amount of personnel: 32,000 _

_Service Information: _

_Construction Start date: April 16__th__, 2160_

_Estimated Completion Date: June 28__th__, 2167 _

Ishigami had to whistle in appreciation. The _Daedalus_ sounded like an absolute beast of a ship. She pressed an icon on her tablet and read the file on the SSV Atlas, which had the exact same warnings about classified information.

_SSV Atlas _

_Class: Dreadnought _

_Length: 4 Kilometers _

_Width: 500 meters _

Engine: V55 Mark III Hybrid Eezo-Repulsor Engines

Slipspace Drive: Mark XI Macedon Y

_Hull: Titanium A3, (8 meters) _

_Armament: _

_1 Magnetic Acceleration Cannon (8 shots per charge, 1500 ton rounds used) _

_1 Prototype Plasma Accelerator Cannon or PAC (Unclear if weapon will be mounted on the ship, but initial tests are promising) _

_100 Heavy Deck Guns (all with Element Zero cores) _

_10 Hyperion Class-II Nuclear Missiles (150 Megatons) _

500 Jericho Missile Pods

_300 Archer missile pods _

Naval Personnel: 4000

_AI: Phoebe _

Marines: N/A

Vehicles: N/A

TDST: N/A

OMEGA: N/A

_Estimated Construction Date: July 23__rd__, 2162_

_Estimated Completion: December 3__rd__, 2165_

_Special Notes: As you can see, there are no ground troops of the like assigned to the Atlas, nor will there _ever_ be. This ship and all those like it built in the future is constructed for one single purpose; to wage war in space and terminate any hostile alien fleet with extreme prejudice. _

Pretty standard for what she expected, Ishigami nodded to herself. What caught her eye however, was the mention of the PAC. It was being developed by the UNSC and Alliance in secret on Archon. From what she was told, the PAC was used for naval engagements and planetary bombardment. The weapon worked by compressing ionized gas in several magnetic fields inside of the canon's barrel. As the plasma became compressed, the heat's temperature rises exponentially. A magnetic pulse pushes the plasma out of the barrel with high force, travelling at over 30,000 meters per second. The canon could easily pierce through shielding and hulls would be atomized. However, the weapon came with a tremendous cost. Fire the round cost a tremendous amount of energy, more so than conventional ship reactors could reasonably produce and continue ship-to-ship combat, not to mention that if the Atlas didn't lower it shields before the weapon fired, the entire ship would be destroyed. Honestly, even Ishigami didn't think the weapon was worth it, currently, but alas, that wasn't her call. Finally, she clicked on the last icon.

SSV Olympus

Class: Supercarrier

_Length: 18 kilometers (_Ishigami's eyes bulged out of her sockets in complete shock)

_Width: 4.5 kilometers _

Engine: Experimental XR5 Boglin Fields with Element Zero core

_Slipspace Drive: Mark XI Macedon X _

_Hull: 12 meters Titanium-A3, Double Layer Energy Shielding

_

_Armament: _

_4 Magnetic Accelerator cannon (10 Shots per Charge) _

_10 Plasma Torpedo Cores _

_2500 Jericho Missile Pods
>2000 Archer Missile Pods

_400 Heavy Deck Guns
>100 Hyperion-II Nukes

_Complement and crew (all subject to change): _

_120 Squadrons of Fighters _

1000 Pegasus Dropships

_Unknown Number of Mako _

_Unknown Number of Warthogs _

3 MAWLRS

Systems Alliance Marines (50,000)

Navy: 15,000

_TDST (30 Battalions) _

_OMEGA: 2000, O-Deck _

_Total Amount of Personel: 100,000+ minimum
>

_Artificial Intelligences: Odin and Leonidas _

_Estimated Start of Construction: November 15__th__,
2161_

_Estimated Completion: Originally, September 25__th__, 2170, revised
to November 9__th__, 2183_

_Special notes: The _Olympus_, due to its gargantuan cost, will likely remain the only Supercarrier in the Alliance fleet for half a century at least bar some extraordinary circumstances. Roughly half of the Systems Alliance budget is being allocated over the next 20 years in construction costs. Now, do note when I say "half" I don't mean consecutively every year, half of the budget goes to the Olympus, I mean divide the budget we have now, and spread it out over twenty years. _

"...Holy _shit_," Ishigami cursed out loud. Just what kind of voodoo accounting _**bullshit**_ did Xavier pull off to fund the construction of a ship that size, without breaking the Alliance's treasury?! And people thought _she_ was crazy?! 18 kilometer ship, they could've built dozens of cruisers, or hundreds of frigates, planetary defenses, and the like with the amount of resources they would put in to build it.

Then again, this was over a_ twenty year_ period. The Alliance found new planets for resources practically every day. Obviously some had more than others, but all of it added up. She prayed Xavier knew what the hell he was doing, because one wrong move and the Alliance could potentially go bankrupt. Much better than UNSC spending half of its budget on Infinity, according to Lasky. Then again, they built Infinity from scratch, while the Alliance was practically given blueprints for free and head the Huragok to speed up up the process. Even still, building the Daedalus, Atlas, and Olympus would take time and ultimately, money.

Izanagi appeared on her desk, the AI's facial expression both seemingly excited and alarmed.

"What is it, Izanagi?" The admiral wasn't even remotely bothered by the fact that the AI was essentially looking at her while she was practically half-naked.

"We've figured out where that eezo trail was coming from," Izanagi

informed her simply.

Ishigami was stoic as a brick wall. "Go on."

"We've managed to trace it all the way back to their home planet, which we're practically at their doorstep now. They only discovered eezo a couple years ago and are experimenting, just like us. I took the liberty of hacking into their satellites and we've learned quite a lot about them. Even translated their languages too. Quite the handiwork you humans do to prepare our translation software." Of course, Izanagi, and the Alliance didn't realize, was that software was based from Forerunner technology. They spent thousands of years interacting with sapient species across the entire Milky Way. It came as no surprise that their translation software was perfected to the point where even new species' languages could be translated perfectly without hassle.

"Is that so?"

Izanagi gave grin. "You're gonna love this. We're not dealing with one dominant species, we're dealing with _two_."

The Director of the Office of Alliance Intelligence blinked twice, in total surprise. Okay, she totally didn't see that one coming.
"Wow..."

"So...what do you suggest we do, Admiral?"

She leaned into her desk and gave a devilish smirk. "That's easy...we'll convince them to join the Systems Alliance."

* * *

><p>Aww snap! The Alliance just discovered not one, but TWO sapient species in the Skyllian verge, and they're not Batarians?! :O Who are these mysterious species? Will they join the Systems Alliance? And what will Torun Solus do with his new discovery? Find out next chapter of Mass Effect: The New Journey.

**ALL RIGHT! I'm having another OC submission contest! This will be the second of three total OC submissions, so you'll get a lot of shots to submit your OCs! **

**Here's what I need: I'm building the OMEGA equivalent of Blue team. I'm going to be picking Four OCs I like the best, so send me everything you got! Remember, OMEGAs in this story come from Special Forces across the entire world, so I need everything, from bio, personality, appearance, etc. I want you to get extremely creative, but don't be downright ridiculous. Also, I cannot emphasize enough: the longer and more detailed the OMEGA OC you submit, the higher chance he/she will have of getting picked. **

**Codex
>

ARCHON: Located dozens of light years away from Axiom Prime, Archon is the training facility for the OMEGA super soldier program. The planet is extremely harsh, but tolerable, making it perfect for training elite soldiers to fight in hostile conditions. Archon is twice the size of earth and makes a complete orbit around its star

every 456 Earth Days.

Strategic Defense Platforms: Called SDPs or SD Platforms, depending on personal preference, these satellite weapons are stationed hundreds of miles above Archon and will terminate any ship that enters the Eris system if it detects even a single hot weapon. All SDPs are controlled by a network of dumb AI.

5. Stirring up the Hornet's Nest

**Mass Effect: The New Journey**

Chapter Five: Stirring the Hornet's Nest

Nothing much to say here, but if you want to submit an OMEGA OC, please do so. I've already chosen one and said person is already been made aware. So that leave's three open slots left, which will end the moment chapter six is up (which is where they will be introduced) Again, I emphasize, the longer and more detailed the profile is, the higher chance it has of getting selected.

Disclaimer: I make no claim of anything except my own work. Mass Effect, Halo, and Titanfall, are under the rights of Bioware, 343 Industries, and Respawn Entertainment, as well as the publishing rights of Electronic Arts, Microsoft Game Studios, and Activision, all respectively.

* * *

><p>SSV Amaterasu, Uncharted System, Skyllian
Verge

April 25**th****, 2160 **

With a bit of a cold grimace, Ishigami poured herself a shot of cÃ©roc, downing it with a couple of anti-depressants, stress relievers, and anxiety pills. Not only was she drinking on duty, but defiantlyâ€”perhaps even imprudentlyâ€”taking medication with alcohol instead of water. However, the intelligence flag officer cared little. Xavier was, literally, the only person who could _actually_ reprimand her for such an action that she would've _severely_ punished a subordinate for. The blatant hypocrisy was not lost on her.

Inhaling and exhaling continuously and controlling her breathing in rhythmic patterns, she allowed herself to slowly let the pills do their intended effect. She gripped the side of the armrest to forcefully stop her trembling hands. Honestly, the woman wanted to shed a tear, despising having these frequent moments of weakness. Swallowing saliva, the shaking stopped.

A knock on her door brought her back to reality. Odd. Most crewmembers were afraid to even speak to her on the bridge, let alone have the balls to come to her private quarters.

"Come in," she permitted, if a bit simply, unused to that level of interaction. Ah, well.

A Systems Alliance officerâ€”a drell with a skin tone on the lighter

shade of jadeâ€"crossed the threshold as the doors split apart. Judging from the gold oak leaf on either shoulder, at just a glance, one could infer that the reptilian alien was a Lieutenant Commander in the Alliance Navy and the Admiral's executive officer. He saluted promptly and sharply. "Admiral."

"Commander Tarsem," Ishigami nodded, not saluting back simply because she didn't have to under these circumstances. Tarsem didn't take it personally, fortunately. "To what do I owe the pleasure?" Reading between the lines and her icy tone of voice, she was tactfully asking: What in the **fuck** are you doing in my private quarters?

Dropping his salute, Tarsem went into parade rest, as perfect a posture as he was taught by his drill instructors when he went through OCS years ago. "Admiral, we're almost finished. The flotilla will be ready to head out within half-an-hour to the homeworld of this species."

Three days ago, Ishigami had contacted Director Xavier, the Chiefs, Admiral Lasky, Rear Admiral (Upper Half) Hackett, the Arbiter, Rtas, and Fleetmaster Iassa of the Home Fleet Flagship and CAS Assault Carrier, Steeple of Ascent. Unfortunately, John-117 couldn't attend the ten-way FTL conference call due to his duties prepping the OMEGA soldiers for war. After hours of deliberation, it was decided that they would send a lightly armed flotilla to meet with the aliens and make contact. This flotilla consisted of six ships: the SSV Amaterasuâ€"Ishigami's heavily customized Strident-class stealth frigateâ€", three Paris-class light frigates, and two SDV- Corvettes from the Fleet of Glorious Repentance. Each had small platoons of Marines, Sangheili warriors, Unggoy, Mgalekgolo, N7 two-man teams, TDST and Titan mechs, for security if invited to the ground. All agreed that anything above frigate class could potentially send the wrong message. However, in case things went south, a small fleet lead by one of the Alliance's very few Valiant-class Ultra-Heavy cruisersâ€"an upgrade over the UNSC's old Super-Heavy cruiserâ€"would remain on standby to make a slipspace jump into the system.

They prayed it wouldn't come to that. Powerful humanity was, but they were still new kids on the block with toys they haven't used in actual combat, only countless simulations. Combined with the drell, and all of her colonies, the Systems Alliance on had a population of around 30 billion, even with the government encouraged baby boom (for both species) that started the moment the Alliance began to colonize outside of the Sol System in the early winter of 2150. Seeing how it was a near mathematical certainty that they were outnumbered by a considerable margin on the galactic stage, the Alliance Parliament encouraged multiple births, giving extreme tax incentives for couples that had four or more kids. Eden Prime, in addition to two additional colonies, had lands that surpassed even the UNSC's Harvest in terms of fertility, feeding all the extra mouths. Thus, food production was practically a non-issue, but just in case, the Alliance Parliament had several contingencies and ration plans were they to fall behind at any given point.

The Alliance needed as many allies as they could, preferably under their direct control and influence. It'd be decades, if not centuries in the worst-case scenario, before they'd have the desirable manpower to "reasonably" take on the galaxy at large. It was for this very

reason that Xavier was practically handed a blank check on expanding Humanity's military might. Defense corporations, weapons manufacturers, and naval ship construction companies were in deep competition trying to earn a contract from the government. It wasn't like the old days where they conspired together to bleed the old Governments of Earth dry in defense spending. Smart AI wrote the laws on weapon contracts long before any outside influence could be 'encouraged'. With no loopholes to take advantage of, companies either had to come to the Alliance with their best tech (and most reliable) or simply go out of business.

"Tell me, commander," Ishigami began leaning into her desk, interlocking her fingers, staring directly into the black eyes of the alien race humanity uplifted. "Why did you come to me in person? Why not have Izanagi?"

"Izanagi said he was busy," he bluntly replied.

Ishigami snorted. A Smart AI too busy to tell his own commander that the fleet was ready? '_Bastard is probably having a field day sorting through all the data of these new species. Dick.' _

"I see. Very well. I need to make a call before we head out. Don't disturb me before then," she commanded, standing up. "You have command of the ship until the moment I step on the bridge."

Tarsem saluted and promptly left Ishigami to her own devices. She pressed an icon on her desk and straightened up her uniform. The four stars on her shoulders signifying her rank of Admiral were polished to a tee and the officer looked damned near radiant.

"Identify yourself," a computerized voice said over the intercom softly.

"Admiral Sayuri Ishigami, Director of the Office of Alliance Intelligence, access code 572943."

There was a pause. "...Identity confirmed. Alpha Encryption protocols are now being enabled." That way no one could dare intercept her message. "Connection secure. Who would you like to contact, Admiral?"

"Director of Alliance Extraterrestrial Affairs and Commander-in-Chief Miles Andre Xavier, Arcturus Station."

"Affirmative, Admiral Ishigami. Please standby."

Ishigami crossed her arms and kept her eyes glued to the screen that was black except for in the center where a spring was going back and forth to show "connecting."

After roughly ten seconds, the enormous office of Director Xavier's office could be seen along with the man who, in layman's terms, was the leader of humanity. Xavier was dressed in all black: a trench coat, semi-thick black vest over his shirt, BDU trousers and combat boots. As always, the dark-skinned man had his goatee and mustache trimmed and neat to perfection. Rising an eyebrow, it was clear he wasn't expecting a call from Ishigami, at least not so soon.

"Admiral Ishigami?" he called out in surprise. "Damn, I know you intelligence types work fast but sheesh," he joked to her chuckling.

Ishigami, however, wasn't in the mood for games. "Cut the crap, Miles," she replied with heavy scowl, giving her superior a withering glare.

Xavier narrowed his eyes. She never called him by his first name unless she was pissed and in private. "Okay, what the hell has gotten into you, Sayuri?" he inquired, also using her first name.

Sayuri snapped her fingers and several holograms of files were projected before her. Being partially made out of hard light (still a relatively new tech to the Alliance) she could physically touch them. She "pushed" one holographic file towards the screen. The file appeared on Xavier's desk within five seconds, real time. "That!"

Gazing down, the Director saw the file that General Hernandez had sent Ishigami almost a month ago. "Oh. That," he remarked dismissively. "What about it?"

"Miles, have you lost your goddamn mind?! " she practically roared. She was livid and didn't even bother hiding behind her façade of stoicism. The time for tact was over, in her eyes. "I was fine with the Atlas, hell even the Daedalus, really. Then I read the file on the Olympus. Are you and Gabriel serious? An 18 kilometer ship?! Do you have any idea how much resources, costs, and sheer time it would take to build that thing?"

"Yes. We were the one's who ran the numbers," Xavier replied with snark and sarcasm. "Why are you so against this?"

"Do you know how many cruisers and other ships we could build with the time and money sunk into the Olympus? Not to mention how much constructing Infinity broke the UNSC in their galaxy. What reason would youâ€œ"

"Stop. Stop right there," he commanded, which she instinctively obeyed. She inwardly cursed that this man had so much subconscious control over her. "You must be under the false and delusional impression that the UNSC's circumstances and our circumstances are comparable. They aren't comparable and they **never** will be. You're equating apples to oranges. They were at war, we aren't. They built the Infinity from scratch; we were given blueprints, along with a plethora of other things, for free. We have the Huragok's help in establishing infrastructure for construction from day one; they didn't have their help until thirty years afterwards. They had four hundred years of experience and mistakes along the way. We've learned from them and adapted to correct their misfortunes wherever we can. Otherwise there'd be no way we could've expanded in the short time we have."

"I know, but..." she bit her lip, silently conceding to his points. "But, why now? Shouldn't we be building more Halcyon, Marathon, Valiant cruisers?"

Xavier sighed. "Sayuri. I'm doing this under the assumption that potential enemies will be bigger than us...stronger than

us... outnumber us. For all **we know currently**, they might have ships that make Infinity look like a frigate in comparison. We could build a hundred cruisers and still be outclassed by an enemy we know nothing about. I'm not willing to take the chance. Besides, it's not like we're building a dozen of them. The Olympus will be the only one of its kind for, at bare minimum, 40 years. By the time the Alliance builds more, it'll be the turn of the 23rd century and I'll have long passed the torch to someone else and retired."

"Fine," Ishigami huffed, hating to be proven wrong. Xavier smirked. He was one of the few people who could beat the Admiral at her own game.

"Now then," the Director spoke, ready to change the subject. "Is everything well prepared? I'd rather this not go south."

"As prepared as it can be, Director." She was back to referring to him professionally. "Security, teams of diplomats and ambassadors, the whole nine yards."

"All right. Don't try anything covert until we can get an idea of what their military capabilities are. We have to play this smart."

"Very well. I'll play nice. Just know that if they turn hostile I won't hesitate to use the Amaterasu to turn one of their cities into a crater." 'Just like on Rakhana...' she thought to herself. It was regrettable, but a necessary evil to pacify the drell. They folded like a wet paper towel soon afterwards.

Xavier nodded. "Do so with extreme prejudice if you have to." There. She had official permission from the top dog himself. Perfect. "Anything else?"

Ishigami looked at the bottle of vodka on his desk and then smirked, as memories came back to her. "Just one...when are you going to fuck me on that very spacious desk of yours?" she asked bluntly. It sounded as a joke, but the flag officer was dead serious.

Any normal man would've been taken back and stuttered in shock, but not Xavier. The director returned her expression highly amused. "Depends. If you're a good girl and you pull this off...I'll oblige wholeheartedly."

"Ohh..." she cooed. "Guess I better get started then."

"That you should. Good luck, Sayuri." The director terminated the connection. Ishigami grabbed whatever she needed and went out of the door, heading straight for the bridge of the Amaterasu.

* * *

><p>Paris-Class Frigate, SSV **Lexington,** Hangar Bay**

Ten kilometers off the starboard side of **SSV Amaterasu, Unknown System**

In the hangar bay of the SSV Lexington, there were dozens upon dozens

of personnel from different branches of the Alliance Armed Forces, civilians, and ambassadors, among others making preparations to make first contact with a new race! Of course, that information was classified at the highest levels, and very few individuals that weren't already in this system knew.

For Second-Lieutenant Claire Carter, she had mixed feelings of the entire situation. Sitting inside her Stryder TITAN mech, she observed some of the beings in the bay. She had hoped this new race wouldn't have to be uplifted like the drell were nearly a decade ago. She wasn't xenophobic, per se, she just rather not have to talk to them if she could avoid it. She knew it was wrong, fundamentally, but she couldn't help how she felt.

"El-Tee! The hell are you still doing in that Stryder, still? Having a long masturbation session?" shouted a voice as an Ogre strolled in front of her TITAN, the size difference made abundantly clear.

Claire quickly muted her microphone, before busting out laughing. That was Major Nazzarian, in all of his crude humor. Strangely, she didn't mind it, mostly because he treated everyone like that. "You all will be equally shitted on." According to him. Squad still loved him regardless. He was one hell of a TITAN pilot.

"No, sir, nothing's going on here," she dutifully replied, trying to refrain from guffawing.

"Uh huh," he scoffed. "Could've fooled me. Get your ass out on the double. We've got a debrief in five."

Claire sighed and opened the hatch and jumped out, the inhibitors built within her bones suppressing any pain she might have felt.

"He seems quite the character." She turned to her left and was greeted by an N7 agent, dressed in full-blown ACIS armor. He had his helmet retracted, but it was clear that he was of Chinese descent.

She smiled whimsically. "Yeah, that's Major Nazzarian for ya. Crude, but still willing to bleed for his fellow TDST."

"I hear that," he replied. He held out his hand. "Kai Leng, N7 Special Forces, Shanxi Division," He introduced himself.

Claire smiled and shook the N7 agent's hand. "Claire Carter, TDST, 2nd Division, 1st Battalion, Echo Squadron."

Kai Leng rose a brow. "1st Battalion? Huh, I think my partner might be interested in that."

"Oh, really? How so?"

"You'll see." He turned partially and yelled out. "Yo! Thane! Get your ass over here for a sec!" Claire chuckled. For a guy who was more or less supposed to be a glorified ninja, he was pretty loud. Not that she minded. It was certainly better than dealing with her brother. She grimaced. She still hadn't heard from Mike in almost four years after he went on some long-term mission. The Alliance had assured her he was still alive, so that gave her some comfort.

Thane strolled up grunting, not even in his ACIS armor, he was in his black outfit that he used to wear before he joined the N7 assassination division. "Ugh, damn, Kai, do you have to be so loud?"

"Yes."

"..."

"Love you too."

The drell assassin rolled his eyes. Claire grimaced a bit, uncomfortable at Thane's entrance. She shifted a bit on her left, subconsciously stepping backwards. The drell was well aware of her actions, but chose not to comment to save the poor officer embarrassment.

"This here is my partner. Thane."

Thane held out his hand politely. "Krios. Thane Krios," he introduced himself. Claire blinked a bit before shaking his hand.

"Wait...you wouldn't happen to be related to Tarius Krios would you?" Claire exclaimed feeling a bit more comfortable by the minute at that knowledge.

"Yes. He's my brother. He's a TDST Senior Non-Commissioned Officer-in Charge 2nd Division, 2nd Battalion."

Claire's eyes widened. Tarius was one of the few drell she could actually talk to openly without fear and here it was his brother would serve with her on a highly classified mission? It was a small galaxy indeed.

"Whoa! I used to be his subordinate till I commissioned! He and Lieutenant Greystone are some damn good pilots," she praised of her former commanding officer. She had immense respect for the El-Tee, with his leadership abilities practically unparalleled. Claire wouldn't be surprised in the slightest if ten-to-fifteen years he became the head of the entire TDST Corps as a flag officer.

"Indeed he is," Thane agreed. "He got deployed a few months ago."

"Oh? Where?"

The drell shook his head. "Dunno. All I knew is that it was classified and he couldn't tell me."

"I see," Claire replied, her hairs standing on the back of her neck. This sounded all too familiar with her brother's deployment. Could it be one in the same? A small chance, yes, but one she couldn't dismiss completely.

Before Kai Leng could add his own input, the intercom blared signaling for every signaling everyone that it was time. They all began to gather around, Kai Leng, Thane, and Claire standing close knit, a small bond already forming, subtly.

A human ensign pressed a button and the holographic form of Admiral Ishigami appeared, broadcasting from the Amaterasu apparently. Every single one of them saluted the Chief. She saluted back, professionally, and got down to business.

"You're all aware of the basics, so I'm going to try and keep this short and simple. A few months ago, OAI detected vast quantities of Element Zero all across the Skyllian Verge. Seeing as how only OAI ships couldn't produce even half of what we detected, we assumed and have confirmation that it was another alien civilization. Assuming they were hostile, the Alliance stopped all expansion into the Skyllian Verge."

The home planet of the civilization appeared next to Ishigami, as well as a comparison to Earth. The planet was roughly 1.5 times bigger than humanity's home world. There were few ships in geosynchronous orbit, the largest one barely topping out at over 600 meters. Mere ants in comparison to the Infinity and the Sangheili Assault carriers, really. The planet was mostly mountains and jungle, with enormous megalopolises with buildings that stretched up to five kilometers in height.

"Izanagi, my AI, has already taken the liberty of hacking into their satellites, and even learned their language and translated it to English. You should be receiving translation software shortly after this briefing."

Seeing their nods, Ishigami turned to the holographic image of their world. "Now, then. They call this planet 'Zestiria', or it's more formal name, the Zestrian Pact. The planet is inhabited by two dominant species: the Draxians and the Caleans (pronounced KEY-Ins). Their government is similar to Ancient Sparta: the planet is ruled by two kings, one from each species, and a council underneath them."

Another image appeared, headline of "Draxian" above its head, slowly rotating 360 degrees. The alien was similar to the drell in some ways, but reminded mostly of the aliens from the 20th century, 'greys'. They were humanoid, tall, about 6'2 on average and lean. Four fingers and three toes adorned their bodies, as well as clothing that made them look like warrior monks.

"These are the Draxians. They are, for the lack of a better term, the brains behind the entire Pact. This world is rich in element zero and the Draxians have evolved with it. I'm sure you've all heard of the incidents of children being exposed to eezo exhibiting powers?" They nodded. "This is the result of that. Our closest translation of what they call it is...biotics. They're quick, agile, and have bones tougher than humans, although their skin and organs are just as fragile."

Technically useless g-whiz information, but if it ever came to war, invaluable for any Alliance soldier, should there be war.

Another image appeared, for the Caleans. These aliens resembled giant overgrown humanoid lizards, with bright yellow eyes, and teeth that looked like they could crush steel, let alone human flesh. They were as tall as the average Jiralhanae of old and looked muscular enough to easily take one on. "Caleans, they form the backbone of the military of the Pact, although there is a respectable minority of

Draxian soldier. Ironically, one would think the Draxian would be stealthy, but all actuality, it was the Caleans. Their skin has a reactive coating similar to an octopus, but in doing so, they not only take after their environment, but apparently their scales lock in any all heat, making thermal detection nigh useless. They're tough bastards to put it lightly. It takes some serious firepower to bring them down, but they will be brought down...eventually."

"There is more, but that's the basics. On a technological level, the Zestirian Pact is somewhat on the level of humanity in the early 2110s. Since the discovery of eezo, they've achieved spaceflight and have colonized two worlds to relieve them of their overpopulated cities."

"What kind of numbers are we dealing with, Admiral?"

"Hard-to-say," Ishigami replied honestly. "Although Izanagi was able to hack their satellite systems, a lot of their classified weapon systems and technology aren't on any kind of grid to be hacked. We hypothesize it's still kept on traditional paper to prevent anyone from within the Pact from learning of it...as well as any species that visited. But...to answer your question, we believe both the Draxian and Caleans combined number at about 13 billion, give or take a billion or so."

'_13 billion...so...if they ally with us or come under our banner...then that would mean the Systems Alliance would be responsible for roughly 43 billion inhabitants,_' Claire thought to herself with a grimace. She already thought the drell would be a long-term drain on the Alliance, what would the Pact be?

"We're doing this by the book. Standard first contact protocols. If we're invited to the ground, you'll all provide security. If they're hostile...well...let's just say they won't be achieving spaceflight for the next two hundred years if they're lucky." It was cold, but Ishigami took no chances when it came to the Alliance's safety.

"You have your orders! Let's get it done!"

"Yes, ma'am!"

Ishigami sighed as her hologram vanished. Leaning back in her command chair, she took a deep breath.

"Take us in."

* * *

><p>Citadel Presidium,

Alliance Standard April 25**th****, 2160**

Torun Solus sat in the waiting area around the Citadel Presidium, his head cocked back, barely able to contain his anxiety and nerves. In his lap was a briefcase with files and documents that would likely change the course of the galaxy. After his discovery of the orbital strikes, the STG officially concluded their investigation, not even a week later. Now he was going to speak with the Council as a whole with a proposal so insane that he wasn't even sure he himself believed it. He had hoped Councilor Valern had followed through with

his request for certain individuals to also attend the meeting.

An asari came up to him and bowed her slightly. "The Council will see you now," she told him and walked off.

Nodding to her in thanks, the STG agent made his way to the elevator. It was empty. Good. Then there would be no stops on the way to the Council's more secluded Chambers. What they were going to discuss couldn't be leaked out. The Citadel already had enough headaches with the Terminus Systems. No need to add another.

He finally arrived, as the elevator stopped about midway before the floor to the Council Chambers that were known to the public. Entering a password and a quick biometric scan confirmed he was who he said he was. The titanium doors slid open partially, and Torun stepped through. The doors locked themselves the moment he crossed the threshold.

The Council's private chambers was state-of-the-art. Using the absolute bleeding edge technology jointly developed by all three-member species, it was considered the most secure place in the galaxy. Nothing got in or out without the Council's permission, and even if you somehow did break the 3 meters of solid reinforced titanium doors, by then the Council would've been evacuated and the intruders would have thousands of C-Sec officers and dozens of veteran Spectre agents stationed at the Citadel. Torun wasn't arrogant enough to think that the Council was assassination proof, but the results spoke for themselves.

Stepping through another threshold after a series of checkpoints, the STG agent finally found himself in the presence of the three most powerful beings in the galaxy, plus two other guests, sitting at a table in the shape of a crescent moon with the three sitting at each corner.

In the center of the triumvirate, was the Asari matriarch, Tevos. She was, obviously, the longest serving member of the council with over a century and some change of galactic political experience. Her skin was shade of lilac with markings on her face and eyes that showed wisdom, but layers of political conniving and diplomatic proficiency. Of all the three council members, she was the only one who greeted the Salarian with a small smile, if only to make him feel comfortable and the much more subtle approach of making him subconsciously listen to her suggestions than the others. A ploy she had played for decades with wonderful achievement.

To Tevos' left was Councilor Valern, Salarian councilor and de facto head of the Special Task Group. He was, for the most part, a pretty ordinary Salarian councilor. He liked his wars won before they even started and while he didn't like to bother with extreme specifics of unsavory operations, he wasn't above personally getting others further his political goals.

To the right of Tevos was the Turian councilor, Sparatus. He was the youngest member of the council, not even three years into his appointment. In Torun's opinion, the Turian councilor was...an enigma to say the least. Unlike his predecessors, he was quiet, reserved, cold thinking. He had expected the Turian to be a walking stereotype, but he wasn't. He rarely did even spoke aloud, let alone raise his voice in anger. He sat back, observed, calculated, and made

decisions. He gave his opinions, sure, but they were more out of empiricism than emotion, which made the Turian seem...detached, emotionally. Torun could reasonably predict the reactions of Tevos and Valern and already played some counterarguments in his head, but Sparatus was another story entirely.

Behind Sparatus was two Turians: Septimus Oraka and Cyprian Isanti, the Hierarchy's top military leader and Palaven's Primarch. He had requested them for a reason, as they'd be instrumental in pulling this off.

"Councilors, General, Primarch," he each greeted them curtly. Tevos, Valern, Septimus, and Cyprian all nodded back to him. Sparatus, on the other hand, simply stared, interlocking his fingers. Torun would be lying if he said that the Turian councilor's silence disturbed him to no end. However, he had a much pressing matter to deal with.

"You're a very respected member of the STG, Torun. Not many individuals could request a private audience with the Council and actually have it be granted," Tevos spoke softly, but Torun knew the underlying threat: you had better not waste our time.

"I'm well aware, Councilor," Torun replied respectfully, setting his briefcase down. "However, I do believe you must take steps to be prepared of a potential threat in the future."

Sparatus' eyes narrowed. "Go on." He was clearly showing interest. Any threat to the Citadel had to be neutralized.

"As I'm sure Councilor Valern has already informed you, the STG had been keeping tabs on species stuck in a cycle of perpetual war, famine, poverty and sometimes, genocide," he grimly reminded them. Tevos visibly grimace, those subjects not being one of particular comfort of her. Valern was stoic and even Sparatus' eyes showed traces of empathy, knowing the traumatizing psychological effects such practices can cause.

"However, a few years ago the STG made an astonishing discovery: the planet is a barren wasteland."

"A wasteland? They killed themselves off?" Tevos responded instantly.

"No. They were gone. Vanished off the face of the planet. No corpses in sight."

With the sole exception of Valern, who was already aware, everyone's eyes in the room widened. "Vanished? That could only mean..."

"They were uplifted," Sparatus concluded, as dozens of variables started to play in his head.

"Goddess," Tevos rubbed her forehead in frustration.

"Do we have any idea whom the perpetrators are?" Septimus asked in thinly veiled anger at some upstart species violating an old Council edict.

"Unfortunately, we do not. However, I'm afraid it gets worst than

that. We've found high concentrations of Hawking Radiation all throughout the system and on the planet."

"Hawking Radiation?"

"It's a thermal radiation that's emitted by black holes due to quantum effects," Torun explained rather simply. "What makes this unusual, is that the hawking radiation was spread out...evenly, suggesting micro-black holes were made and then evaporated quickly by Hawking Radiation."

"You seem to be suggesting that the race that uplifted them, their ships leaves traces of this...Hawking Radiation," Sparatus commented, putting several pieces together.

Torun blinked. "Yes, exactly." Clearly Torun was expecting to have to...dumb it down for lack of a better phrase.

"I see."

"Anyhow, this brings me to several points." Clicking his briefcase, he pulled up a hologram of Rakhana. "Several concentrations here." He pointed. "Here." Again. "And here."

"My fellow councilors, we're dealing with a race that's very unlikely to use Element Zero."

"Absurd!" Cyprian protested. "The entire galaxy runs on Eezo!"

"While his outburst is a bit dramatic, I have to agree with the Primarch, Torun," Tevos said gently. "What evidence do you have?"

"Simple, the high concentration of Hawking radiation. It was all evenly distributed consistently. Because of that even distribution, I'm inclined to believe that they travel the stars through some kind of wormhole or portal. The exact methods of how, I'm unsure."

"If what you say is true..." Septimus slammed his fist into a palm. "Then that would mean travel through the Mass Relays would be negligible."

"Indeed. To say they have a massive strategic advantage is an understatement."

Tevos wanted to deny it, but every bit of logic and reason brought her to the same conclusion: Torun was on to something and if the Council didn't act, or at the very least prepare, they were going to be serious repercussions. She repressed a sigh. She was enjoying this wave of relative peace within the galaxy, minus the Pseudo- Cold War with the Terminus Systems. Alas, all good things must come to an end sooner or later. Her late mother had taught her that from the cradle.

"See this crater?" Torun pointed towards Deska region. "That was an orbital strike. We're not entirely sure what for what purpose, but the round used had traces of iron and tungsten...weighing in over 600 tons."

Now that tidbit got everyone's attention. "600 tons? An orbital strike round weighed that much? Not even our dreadnoughts come anywhere near that much mass!" Sparatus shouted in complete shock.

"We have to put them down," Cyprian declared, earning a shocked look from Tevos as his implication sunk in.

"I agree, we do," Sparatus acknowledged. "But...we have to do this intelligently. We're dealing with complete unknowns and charging in like reckless idiots will only

get the vast majority of our fleets killed."

"We are the most powerful Navy in theâ€"

"Cyprian...shut up right now," Sparatus interjected, his eyes narrowed. He didn't just silence the Primarch; everyone in the room was taken back. "For too long the arrogance of this Council and our species have grown like an infectious weeds in the garden. Let's look at the facts: an unknown race that has the ability to bypass the relays has uplifted a race of their own, literally, right under the STG's radar and barely leave a trace of their presence. That fact alone should tell you we aren't dealing with amateurs, but it seems I need to forcefully slap some reality into you."

Torun and Valern had their mouths agape. Who knew a simple briefing could make the Turian councilor come out of his shell?

"Second, a 600 ton ship round. Depending on how fast it travels in the void, it would gut most of our ships in a single shot, two or three if the Spirits feel like shining luck on us! No, Cyprian, we are the most powerful Navy in the galaxy as of right now. You might let your pride blind you, but I was elected to this Council for a reason and unlike my predecessors I've long learned to look at the big picture. Will they need to be put down? Likely. But until we have the proper intelligence, we will tread with caution. Am I clear?"

Cyprian clenched his mandibles in restrained fury. "Yes." His reply was a simple one, fearing saying anything more might make him go off.

He turned back to Torun. "What do you suggest we do?"

"Temporarily repeal the Treaty of Farixen."

Tevos immediately stood up in protest. "Are you insane?!" The Treaty was arguably the most important law in Citadel space. According to its terms, it limited the number of dreadnoughts each race was allowed to have, with the Turian Hierarchy having the most out of them all.

"On the contrary, he's perfectly rational," Valern told his fellow councilor. "Considering the evidence we have, this race very likely has a powerful navy, one we shouldn't take lightly. We're going to need as much firepower as we can get. Among the three of us, we already have tens of thousands of cruisers. We'll simply dedicate a portion of our budgets creating as many dreadnoughts as we can in a certain time period."

Tevos glared at the Salarian. "You too!? Surely you can't believe all of this is necessary."

"I don't like it anymore than you do," Valern admitted. "But, that's our job is it not? Do what others aren't willing to do. Make the hard choices. To put the galaxy above our own personal desires."

Tevos' clenched her fists and gritted her teeth. "Fine," she finally conceded, but gave a enormous glare at every single occupant in the room. "But, if we can find a diplomatic solution we will take it. No unnecessary bloodshed."

"And if it is necessary?" Septimus inquired, staring deep into the matriarch's eyes.

"**I** will be the one who determines that," she replied coldly and dismissively of the General. He grunted, but nodded nonetheless.

"While I like the idea of expanding our might, how will we deal with the Terminus Systems? If they see major increases in defense spending they will likely think the Citadel is prepping for a massive invasion."

"Your right Primarch Cyprian, however I've already thought of that. It's simple: we simply keep the repeal of the treaty secret. We only inform the governments of our client race and we ask them to keep silent. Have the STG monitor their every move. Anyone we even remotely think of breaking silence...well..."

Torun let the threat hang in the air, where even Tevos was completely unphased, silently showing her support of regrettable, but ultimately necessary actions.

"I see. Very well, then."

"How long should the repeal last?"

"Ten years at minimum," Sparatus instantly replied. "Anything longer and the council will go through extensive review." Torun nodded and looked at the other two, both nodded in reluctant agreement. He could understand their frustration; they were, quite literally, preparing for a potential adversary they knew very little about.

'_Then again, it's unlikely they know about us either.' _The thought gave the STG agent some comfort.

"Where will we build these dreadnoughts?"

"Isn't it obvious?" Sparatus pointed towards Rakhana. "You mentioned in one of your reports there were large untapped concentrations of eezo in the system, no?"

"Hmm...intriguing, Councilor," Torun admitted. Outside of the STG and obvious the people in this room, it was highly unlikely virtually anyone knew about Rakhana or its disappeared inhabitants. The star had multiple planets with concentrations of resources that were ideal for building the Citadel's kilometer long capital ships. "I approve."

"As do I," said Valern, nodding.

"I suppose I give my consent as well." Tevos didn't even bother trying to pretend she was okay with any of this.

"Then it's settled then. The Treaty will be repealed...quietly. I'll make some calls to secure some contracts to kickstart some Weapons Research and Development for our ships and troops. Quadruple our defense budget and build a shipyard in that system."

Everyone in the room bowed their heads toward the Turian councilor in acknowledgement. "Is that all?" Tevos exasperated. She needed a strong drink at the moment.

"Yes. I would like to speak to the Primarch and General alone."

Briefly sharing quick glances at one another, Tevos, Torun, Valern stood up and exited the room. The doors locked automatically, ensuring their privacy.

"What happened to you Sparatus?" General Septimus inquired of the Turian's odd behavior.

"I grew another perspective," he told them simply, standing up to face either of them. "My pride almost cost me my mate's life. In my arrogance I almost gotten her killed. She spent months in the ICU all because of _me_. And she still forgave me even afterwards. Never again."

"I'm sorry," Cyprian replied with genuine empathy for his Turian superior.

"Don't be. It's in the past. It's my mistake, so I will bear the responsibility of making up for it till the day I last draw breath," Sparatus waved him off.

"So, why did you want us alone?"

"You know damn well why, General. I'm of the opinion that now may be the time to deploy..._them_." he remarked cryptically.

General Septimus' eyes widened to their greatest extent in disbelief knowing exactly what he was referring too. "Councilor! With all due respect, don't you think that's a bit...extreme?"

"Wait, what?" Cyprian's facial expressions showed confusion and misunderstanding. "Who is 'they'?"

Already anticipating the question, Sparatus handed him his personal tablet with the relevant file already opened. As the Turian Primarch read its contents his eyes grew bigger and bigger with each passing paragraph.

"Spirits! Does the STGâ€" "

"No. We've gone through ludicrous lengths to keep it under wraps. All of those involved are in it for life and are on media blackout as well as constant surveillance. No one gets in or out without my or

the General's permission."

"I...see." The Hierarchy had something like _tha_t and he, a
**Primarch**, had absolutely no clue about until now?!

"Yes. I do." With a push of a button, Councilor Sparatus sent the most encrypted dispatch known to sapient kind to a remote planet in the outskirts of the Terminus Systems.

A Turian technician was busy enjoying his lunch when he heard a beeping noise on his monitor. Taking his meal with him, he stared at the screen. The moment he read the message, he dropped his food in shock as:

The Spirits deem them worthy of service.

_HUNTER'S PROTOCOL IS NOW INITIATED _

HUNTER'S PROTOCOL IS NOW INITIATED

* * *

><p>Timeline:

_April 26th, 2160: After narrowly avoiding catastrophe after arriving near the Zestrian Pact, Admiral Ishigami and a team of delegates are granted an audience with the dual monarchy. After hours of negotiations, the Draxians and Caleans conclude that joining the Systems Alliance isn't in the best interests of the Zesterian denizens, and politely decline. Although refusing to be directly under Alliance influence, the Systems Alliance and the Zestirian Pact agree to trade and economic ties. In addition, no Alliance warship above frigate class may enter Pact territory above frigate class without the expressed consent of the Kings. _

_May 1__st__, 2160: The Two Kings and Director Xavier sign IFTA or the Interstellar Free Trade Agreement, authorizing limited trade between the Systems Alliance and the Pact. Hundreds of companies from each government start expanding and setting up shop, in each other's colonies, similar to the United States and China in the early 21__st__ century. _

_May 5__th__, 2160: The Citadel Council quietly repeals the Treaty of Farixen in preparation for a potential war against unknown adversaries. Within a ten-year period, every race affiliated with the Citadel can build as many dreadnoughts as they can afford. The repeal is kept secret from the public. A shipyard is built in Rakhana's system, where dreadnoughts for all three member races are building an armada of capital ships, using what resources Rakhana has left, and the untapped reserves in its neighboring planets. _

_November 6__th__, 2160: The Alliance allows some defense corporations to sell weapons and munitions to the Pact, provided they are not as effective as Alliance weaponry _

_December 7__th__ 2160: The Alliance begins to understand biotics in far greater detail under the guidance of the Pact_

_March 22__nd__, 2161: The SSV Daedalus begins construction, nearly one year behind schedule _

_June 2163: After years of R&D, the UNSC and Alliance introduce the EXCALIBUR armor for the OMEGA supersoldiers, as well as the Mark XII MJOLNIR Armor for SPARTAN-IIs and SPARTAN-IIIs, and MJOLNIR-GEN IV for UNSC's SPARTAN-IVs. The OMEGA program is still classified, but some members have been sent out on missions. _

_July 2165: With frequent travel to each other's colonies between the civilians of their respective governments becoming extremely common place, the Systems Alliance and Zestirian Pact agree to come into a military alliance, in the same vein as NATO: if one member is attacked, the other is obliged to come to the other's aid. In light of this, the Alliance allows, with heavy regulation, corporations to sell slipspace drives to the Pact, noting the inferior method of FTL travel used by the Pact. _

_December 2165: As expected, the SSV Atlas completes construction. Steven Hackett is given command, with Captain Hannah Shepard as his XO. _

_May 2166: The construction of the SSV Daedalus further falls behind schedule. It's estimated completion time is, at best, by New Years, 2170. The Olympus, in an ironic twist, moves ahead of schedule.

_

_October 1__st__ 2167: The Batarian Hegemony decides to expand into the Skyllian Verge after decades of planning and preparation_

_October 21__st__ 2167: Present Day_

* * *

><p>Karasis, Axiom Prime Capital city, Bar

October 21**st****, 2167**

Kurasis was one of the very few megalopolises in Alliance territory, let alone on a single colony. In a short amount of time, the urban city had grown to a size easily comparable to New York, and equally as diverse, with human, drell, and even a decent sized minority of Draxian and Caleans on galactic visas. Naturally, with such a diverse city, there were plenty of bars, nightclubs, and entertainment available.

Tyson, Tarius, Thane, and Kai Leng had all decided to take leave together and were enjoying a nice game of cards while having a couple drinks.

"Read 'em and weep boys!" Tyson grinned showing a Royal Flush.

"Oh, hell naw!" Kai Leng exclaimed throwing his cards down in frustration.

"This is most...unpleasant," Thane sighed laying his own cards down, sighing in defeat.

"Fuck no, Thane, let's call it what it is. This is some straight up bullshit, yo!"

"Stop hating, Kai," Tarius grinned. "You'll beat us...one day."

"Yeah, that'll be the day. Right around the time when Thane gets laid on his own accord."

Kai Leng visibly cringed. "Daaaamn, Ty! Ice cold."

Thane looked at him at with a slight smirk. He pulled out his cell phone. "Actually, I planned on meeting someone after our time together."

"Whaaat? NO way, dude!"

Thane showed them a selfie of said someone and him in a Karasis public park. It was a female drell, and by drell standards, she was a looker. Tarius whistled. "Damn, bro, you're hitting that tonight?"

Thane looked at his brother in confusion. "Hitting her? No..? I plan on having sexualâ€" ' "

Kai Leng slapped his forehead. "NOT LIKE THAT FOOL!"

"You know what...all this talk about sex makes me want to smash tonight," Tyson admitted. He looked at Tarius, Tarius looked at Kai Leng, and the latter stared back at Tyson. With a shrug, all three simultaneously pulled out their phones scrolling through their contact lists with such fluidity it almost seemed choreographed.

"Still as sexually crude as I remember you, Tyson," a female voice said from behind the officer. Tarius' eyes widened in shock recognizing the woman. Confused, Tyson turned around to stare at an attractive middle-aged blonde with ocean blue eyes. His jaw dropped.

"Hannah?!" Indeed it was. Captain Hannah Shepard was in full Alliance blues. "What are you doing here? Tell me they didn't send you to cut our leave short."

"This isn't business...this...is personal. Can we talk outside, alone?"

"Um...sure?" He followed her outside.

"Who's the hot chick?" Kai Leng asked admiring Hannah from behind.

"An old flame of Ty's," Tarius replied, curtly. Kai Leng grunted. "What chick hasn't Ty smashed?"

Once outside and in a secluded area, Hannah turned back to Tyson. "So...you already know we...didn't part on good terms."

"Don't remind me," Ty cringed as memories came flooding back to him. Technically, when he and Hannah had slept together, he was still enlisted, which would've been fraternization had they gotten caught. "So, are you here to rekindle that or..."

"No, Tyson." She took a deep breath. "I've kept something from you."

Oh, he definitely didn't like where this was going.

"Which was?"

"I think it's time you met your daughter."

* * *

><p>UNSC Infinity, Unknown Space

Halloween 2167

Admiral Thomas Lasky sat in his command chair on the bridge sipping on some rich cocoa, his nerves calming down. Eighteen years. For eighteen years, the UNSC and the Fleet of Glorious Repentance had been essentially stuck in a new galaxy. Lasky didn't look much different, due to how far anti-aging tech had come along in the UNSC, but his eyes just showed...exhaustion. He wasn't even stressed about their current predicament, anymore. He'd just grown used to it. No longer did he constantly wail and wanting to get back home. If he were being honest, there was a part of him that simply just wanted to stay here, permanently.

Not like it was unprecedented, either. A good many of his men were starting to exhibit symptoms of Stockholm syndrome on the galactic scale. Some were using this galaxy to start all over: new families, new friends, and new ideas. They were becoming attached and Lasky couldn't blame them.

Roland appeared on the command desk sounding alarmed. "Admiral! Urgent message from Zestiria! Delta priority!"

The UNSC born Admiral rose to his feet. "Patch it through!"

"_This is Sergeant...Th...Lewis...Zestiria is under...I repeat...unknown...has landed...we cannot hold them...I repeat...we cannot, hold...enemy is taking hostages as sla..."_

The line went dead. There was silence among the crew. Lasky didn't even need Roland to clean the message up. It was plain as day: Zestiria, the homeworld of the Draxian and Caleans, was under attack by an unknown alien force. Lasky silently cursed the fact that the Pact wouldn't allow Alliance warships near their territory.

"Roland...how fast can the Alliance get to Zestiria?"

"At best, about 12 hours, sir." The AI then looked at him. "Sir...I know what you're thinking, but it's crazy! We don't know what we're up against!"

"Got no choice, Roland," Lasky smiled whimsically. "We're the fastest ship in the Alliance, bar none. We have to go," he argued.

Roland, sighed. "All right, sir."

"Send word out to Xavier, tell him to get an Alliance fleet to

Zestiria ASAP! I want all SPARTAN-IV fireteams and ODST ready to deploy. Weapons hot as soon as we enter!"

"Aye Aye Admiral!"

A slipspace portal opened in front of Infinity and the enormous flagship sailed through, hell bent on getting to Zestiria. Lasky cracked his neck in anticipation. He almost felt sorry for the poor bastards who dared decided to invade the Pact's home planet. They were about to get a complete ass kicking from the UNSC's most powerful ship.

They just stirred up the hornet's nest, and by the grace of _God_, they would feel the sting a hundred fold.

* * *

><p>(END)<p>

That's a wrap! The Batarians have finally made their move! You'll see how the invasion started, next chapter. As you can see, I've set up a lot of future plot points with this chapter as well as added some characterization to the personalities of the big four (Ty, Tarius, Kai Leng, Thane). That conversation is based off something that happened in real life. I HAD to throw it in, haha.

**By the way, submissions for OMEGA OCs end the next chapter! Get your submissions in while you still can! Again, the longer the profile, the more chance it has of getting accepted! **

No Codex till next chapter when everything comes together

6. Of their Own Accord Part 1

**Mass Effect: The New Journey**

Chapter Six: Of their Own Accord

Again, not much to say here, but I'm extending the deadline of OMEGA OC's to next chapter. Due to the sheer volume of submissions, the OMEGA Blue-Team will have six members instead of four, so guess what? Your chances of getting selected just went up!

Also important! I'm dropping a lot of tech and information in this chapter, so if you already have an OC submitted and you want to send me an updated version, I'd HIGHLY advise you to do so to take into account all the new information I'm gonna be dropping. Hold on to your butts, boys and girls! It's about to get wild!

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* * *

><p>Zestiria, Azola Defense Platform, Geosynchronous Orbit,

October 30**th****, 2167 **

Nearly 300,000 kilometers above the breathable atmosphere of Zestiria, Teseka Valie, a Draxian military officer, sat by his lonesome in the relatively small bridge of "Azola", a defense platform and space station, all in one. Taking a sip of a human beverage, he sighed and sat the cup down on the console, clearly bored out of his mind. He was working the equivalent of a "night-shift" and thus, for the next few hours, he was the only one on the bridge.

Azola didn't have much in terms of defense, outside of a few missile batteries and a 400-meter long rail gun, which stuck out like a sore thumb. The rail gun was nowhere even near as powerful as the Alliance's Orbital Defense Platforms or Strategic Defense Platforms. Hell, the gun was barely as powerful as an Alliance cruiser. But what they lacked in firepower, they made up for in sheer numbers and firing speed. Every two seconds a Zestirian defense platform could fire a slug in the void of space traveling at nearly 25,000 meters per second with 50 kilotons of raw striking power. It was a low number, to be sure, but when you multiplied that with hundreds of other platforms and with their firing speed, even Alliance carriers could be taken down given enough time and competent Zestirian commanders. It was unlikely, but certainly not impossible.

A half an hour passed by and Teseka had already propped his feet up on the consoles and was in and out of consciousness. He felt his chair jerk in one quick motion, forcing him awake and nearly fell on the floor.

"Damn, Teseka, can't leave you alone for a cycle without you falling asleep," a deep voice said. The Draxian officer gazed up and scowled in irritation.

"Xartan, you would be the one to wake me up from my slumber," he groaned. Xartan was a Caelean, a tall one at that, standing at a colossal 9'4". The lizard alien was covered in armor that was eerily similar to the Sangheili with one major difference: Caelean armor had no energy shielding.

Xartan gave him a grin showing dozens of razor sharp teeth. "Better me than the captain, no?" he asked him rhetorically. Teseka rolled his eyes, but silently conceded to his fellow officer's point. Staring at the dark ring in Teseka's cup, Xartan's curiosity got the better of him.

"What's that?"

At first confused, Teseka noticed Xartan was referring to the ring in his cup and smiled. "Ah, you mean this? Well, it's a human drink. They call it 'coffee'," He explained.

"Coffee?" he snorted. "Is that the drink that has every Draxian I know claiming it's a gift from the gods themselves?"

"Yes. It's actually pretty good, depending on what you put into it. Don't knock it till you try it!"

"Well, go make me some then," he told him flatly, wanting to

experience for himself if the beverage lived up to the hype.

"Can't. Next batch doesn't arrive till shift change."

"..."

"What? Don't look at me like that."

Xartan paid him no mind and stared out towards the void of space. He had to admit, it was beautiful. Vixa, the Pact's home system, had roughly the same number of planets as Sol, but the vast majority were solid surface instead of gas giants like Saturn or Jupiter. There were a few mining outposts, but nothing too major as of now. The Kings were focused more on expanding outward into new and uncharted territories rather than at Vixa. Xartan disagreed, but he digressed. That kind of decision was higher than his pay grade.

Shifting to his left, the two officers noted two Brutus-class Heavy Destroyers sail by the camera feeds of Azola station. The Alliance ships were practically the only warships within Pact territory as they were mainly here to protect the embassy located on Kastella, the Zestirian capital. Though they were classified as destroyers by the Alliance, they were only 620 meters long, ridiculously tiny by normal Alliance standards; they were one of the few exceptions the Kings allowed near Zestiria. Ironically, there were tens of thousands Alliance Marines, TDST, and Alliance Army personnel stationed in joint bases on the planet, along with millions of human tourists and immigrants and of course, dependents of military personnel. Conversely, there were Pact bases on Axiom Prime and some ships stationed near Arcturus.

After being relieved of duty by the Destroyers, the two Paris-class frigates revved up their engines, traveled a dozen kilometers into the void and vanished into slipspace, their destination unknown.

Xartan had to snort. "Pft, knowing those ships, they'll probably be at Earth or Axiom Prime before we even get off shift. Wish we had that kind of tech."

Teseka nodded in agreement. "But you know how it is...the Alliance is being stingy with advanced slipspace tech till we make concessions." The Pact's Slipspace drives were considered 'primitive' compared to the Alliance and thus were remarkably slower. By some estimates of Draxian scientists, some of their carriers could travel up to 600 LYPD. The Pact, by comparison, was around 30, 40 if they pushed them to their limits. While it they were certainly faster than the UNSC when they were essentially getting steamrolled by the Covenant, the gap between the Pact and the Systems Alliance/Post-War UNSC was about the size of a nebula.

However, until the Pact formally came under the banner of the Systems Alliance, any sell of the Alliance's more advanced slipspace drives was strictly forbidden. It was pretty underhanded, for sure, but the Pact would do the _exact_ same thing if they were in a similar position, so they honestly couldn't fault them for it too hard without looking like hypocrites. It was still a highly controversial subject amongst Zestirian denizens, almost split 50/50 in favor of the citizens who preferred to stay independent. If the Pact joined the Systems Alliance, then there was talk to split the Alliance in

two: The Systems Alliance would be the Civilian government and dealt with those matters accordingly and the military would unite under the United Races Space Command, or the URSC. In essence, the two organizations would be the equivalent of the United Earth Government and UNSC respectively, except with palpable distinctions. The insignia of the URSC would incorporate symbols from Human, Sangheili, Drell, Unggoy, Mgalekgolo, Draxian, and Caeleas cultures.

"Where do you stand on the whole issue, Xartan?"

"I'm not really sure," Xartan replied. "I see the pros and cons of it all. But I lean slightly towards us joining, if only for the fact that we can't expect to be a contributing member of our alliance when they have ships that are twenty times faster than we are." Privately, Xartan knew beyond a shadow of a doubt Zestiria coming under the Alliance banner was a matter of "when", not "if." The Alliance's decision to let the Pact choose for itself instead of declaring a war in a hostile take over spoke volumes. Humanity, Sangheili, and the Drell would've rolled over the Draxians and Caeleas in two, three weeks, tops. In one single decision, Xartan gained 13 billion allies, practically on a silver platter.

"True," Teseka agreed. "But at the same time I wish to preserve our culture andâ€" a beeping noise from the sensors on the monitors in front of him. Immediately both Caeleas and Draxian went on high alert as they start typing in commands. "Outpost Faex, this is Azola station, sensors are going off the charts. You got anything?"

"..." There was nothing but static. Odd. There was supposed to be someone on station at all times.

"Outpost Saex, this is Azola station, do you copy?"

Again the two officers were met with static and complete silence. Uneasy feelings of dread started to form in the pits of their stomachs. It was one thing for one outpost not to respond, but two? Yeah, something was definitely up.

He then tried the last one. "Outpost Raex, this is Azola station, priority Alpha, do you copy over?!" he practically shouted.

"THEY'RE EVERYWHERE!"

"Raex repeat!"

"I'm looking at _hundreds upon hundreds_ of unknown starships and fighters all over the system! How the _hell_ did they get through?!" There were sounds of gunfire, explosions, and shouting through the communications. Had the unknowns breached the station?

"Standby Raex!" Xartan shouted going through hundreds of files and commands on his monitor.

"No time! Zestiria is not safe! I REPEAT, ZESTIRIA IS NOTâ€" "

A final explosion was heard and the line went completely dead. For a solid ten seconds, both Teseka and Xartan were frozen in complete shock. They somehow had bypassed their early detection systems? Staring at long-range radar, both aliens almost went weak in the knees. There were hundreds upon hundreds of red dots closing in on

Zestiria, ETA twenty minutes at current speeds.

Immediately, Teseka opened a fleet wide channel. "All ships this Azola station! All combat able ships are to prepare for imminent invasion. I repeat, all ships prep for imminent invasion. This is NOT a drill. Deploy all ground forces to planet side to assist in defense. We must protect the Kings!"

* * *

><p>Zestiria, On-board the SSV Come My Way

October 30**th****, 2167 **

Upon hearing the fleet wide transmission, there was practically chaos until Commander Jason Cunningham put an end to the nonsense. "Will everyone calm down? Now!" Everyone stopped what he or she was doing to stare blankly at the human commander. "We are members of the Systems Alliance military and I will not let you lose discipline! Am I clear?!"

They all saluted, apologetically. "Sir!"

"Now, Lt. Asoka, I need all TDST to deploy groundside right now!" he told the female drell officer. "All Pegasus dropships are to proceed with Marines to assist in Kastella!"

"Yes, sir! Relaying orders now."

Barely even two minutes after his order was given, dozens of HEV pods were dropping towards the planet en masse, along with a plethora of Atlas, Ogre, and Stryder mechs. Good. One less thing he had to worry about.

Cunningham then opened a channel to one of the restricted hangars of the Way. On screen was the commander of NOBLE team, Carter-A259. Carter was wearing the brand new MJOLNIR Mark XII that had just come off the production line a few months prior. "Sir!" the SPARTAN-III saluted. Despite being the same rank, Cunningham still had authority over him.

"At ease, son," he told Carter gently. "I have a task for NOBLE team, priority Alpha."

"Whatever it is sir, NOBLE will get it done," Carter said a matter-of-factly.

"Glad to hear it," Cunningham replied before getting down to business. "I need NOBLE team to assist the Royal Guard and extracting the Kings and get them the _hell_ off world and into Alliance space. I don't like our odds if radar is to be believed and the Alliance won't be able to get here in time, I fear. So I'm leaving it up to you six."

Carter nodded. "Consider it done, sir."

"Get going! We don't have much time!"

Cunningham cut the connection and sighed. Backup was, at best, twelve

hours away, and he was about to face an enemy with capabilities he had no way knowing how the Alliance measured up. That being said, if he was going to go down, he was going to take as many of the bastards with him as possible.

"Lieutenant, once NOBLE team is off the Way, I want you to spin up our MAC guns and Archer pods, and bring us to head the Home Fleet."

"Yes, sir!"

Turning to his left he spoke, "Jeffery," he called out softly. On his command chair a one-foot hologram of the Way's Smart AI appeared. Jeffery had chosen the appearance of a 21st century American construction worker for his holographic representation.

"Commander?" he replied, 'tipping' his hard-hat, mimicking upper class UK citizens.

Cunningham interlocked his fingers and sighed, his heart heavy at what he was about to order the AI to do. Swallowing, he pressed on. "Initiate the ENDWAR Protocol." His voice was soft, but Jeffery heard him as clearly as if he had shouted it to the heavens.

Jeffery actually looked taken back, as if doing a double take. "I...sir, are you sure?" ENDWAR was the protocol that virtually all Alliance commanders knew. In essence, when commanders were up against unknown hostiles, all battle data was to be purged from the ship and sent through highly encrypted communications channels back to Alliance High Admiralty and in extreme cases, directly to Xavier, himself. The Way was only a destroyer, and not even carriers could get to Zestiria quickly enough. Cunningham doubted the destroyer would make it before help came so he'd give the Alliance the most valuable intelligence they'd need. Messages could be sent and received even while in slipspace transit, so it wasn't like there were any barriers along the way.

Smiling, he gave the AI a nod. "I'm sure. If...well...when we go down, we're going to take every last one of these sons of bitches to hell with us. Humanity's first Interplanetary War and we're the lucky ones who get to try out our shiny toys in real combat." He had to laugh at the irony. Back on Axiom Prime where he and countless other naval officers from ensign to Admiral were training in simulations of space warfare, he was always nervous, jittery, and often times overtly cautious. Now, in the face of an imminent alien invasion, death almost certainly awaiting him, he felt calm, relaxed even, almost resigned to the inevitable.

"I see," Jeffery replied and streams of data flowed through him as he initiated the protocol which only took half a second, real time. He gazed back up at the calm commander. "For what its worth sir...it's been an honor."

Cunningham smiled, knowing that the AI was being completely sincere. The two had been partners for nearly five years. Jeffery was just as much of a friend as any human or alien he'd met.

"Is NOBLE team off the ship?"

"Yes, sir. They're headed straight for Kastella, per your

orders."

"Good. Let's give 'em hell."

Jeffery gave him a salute. "Aye, sir!"

Staring into the void of space, he looked softly determined. If this were to be his final stand, then by the graces of God himself, he'd go down swinging.

* * *

><p>On-board a Pegasus dropship, NOBLE team was prepping for an inevitable groundside invasion. After confirming with the pilot and navigator that their ETA to an Alliance base on Kastella was roughly ten minutes or so, Carter decided to give the team a small debrief.<p>

"All, right listen up, NOBLE," Carter intoned gaining the attention of the SPARTAN fireteam. "Command believes an alien invasion fleet is on its way to Zestiria, the homeworld of our Draxian and Colean allies. As per protocol, all groundside forces stationed on the Way were deployed to the surface, that includes us."

"What's the mission, commander? Take out a few ships? Search and destroy? Balls out attack?" Emile asked, half-serious, his inner bloodlust starting to display beneath the surface. The SPARTAN-III was playing his knife as he did so.

"Afraid not, Emile," Carter told Noble Four. "Our mission is actually much simpler." He brought up two images of a Colean and a Draxian dressed in robes eerily similar to the Hierarchs of the Covenant, particularly the Prophet of Truth and Regret.

Jun actually blinked. "The Kings?" he commented, voicing NOBLE teams collective confusion.

"That's right," Carter confirmed. "Our mission is both simple and complicated at the same time: we have to get to the palace and extract the Kings, preferably before any of the hostiles land on the planet."

"Pft," Jorge scoffed. "Fat chance of that happening," he replied cynically. If his career as a Spartan and now as an "OMEGA" taught him anything, the chances of this mission remaining simple was about the same as a snowballs chance in hell.

"Agreed with the big guy," Nathan added his own two cents.

Carter nodded with their assessment. "We have to make it to the palace, assist the Royal Guard, safeguard the Kings until we can find transport or the Alliance gets here. Either way, this mission isn't going to be easy...even for us."

Emile pumped his AA-48 ECQCS Shotgun. "Good. Then it won't be boring."

"While it would just be simple for us to fly to the Palace, the Pact has already enacted a no fly zone and we'd be shot out of the sky almost instantly. While we could negotiate our intentions to the

Royal guard, time is not on our side at the moment, unfortunately. So we'll have to go on foot. Listen, the Pact is gonna defend their homeworld till the last man. So will we, Noble," Carter said serious.

They all nodded collectively. They knew exactly what the Pact was about to experience, two fold: once on Reach before being ordered off world and the Second during the Battle of Earth. NOBLE team had stayed behind to help Lord Hood in the defense of Earth when Master Chief, Cortana and the crew of In Amber Clad chased the Prophet of Mercy to Delta Halo.

"Thirty seconds!"

"Let's get it done, Noble!"

When the Pegasus landed, Kat and Emile took point, Carter and Jun center armed with the brand new MA6A and MA6B Hybrid-Eeezo Assault Rifle, respectively, and with Nathan and Jorge covering their six. The Spartan fireteam had faced impossible odds before and this was no different. So they only focused on one singular goal: getting to the Kings and getting the hell off this planet.

* * *

><p>Asilo, Systems Alliance Military Base,

20 Kilometers from Kastella

"Let's go! Locals are going to need all the help they can get evacuating civilians!" TDST Captain Claire Carter shouted to her subordinates. Claire couldn't believe her luck. One of the first humans to step foot on Zestirian soil and would be one of the first humans to see it at war. Christ.

One minute she was enjoying a nice day of leave and in the next alarms were blaring telling all combat personnel to immediately prep for real world combat operations? For an alien invasion?

Grunting, she pushed those thoughts out of her head as she tapped some sensors on her console inside her Stryder TITAN mech. She hummed. A dozen or so drop pods landed a few hundred meters away from her. Twelve TDST operatives punched out in formation in a half circle. There wasn't a single wasted movement.

Claire nodded to herself appreciatively. That was good. She wasn't dealing with rookies. She strolled over to the Alliance's primary special operations shock troopers; the footsteps of her 18 feet tall mech abundantly clear.

IFF tags showed that their leader was in the center, naturally. Claire pressed a button and jumped out. She was immediately saluted, a gesture returned.

"Sergeant First Class Vecila Pearce, ma'am, acting CO of Fireteam Wolfgang, dropping in as ordered," Pearce reported, her accent and name clearly indicating that she was a drell, despite her helmet covering her face completely.

If Claire was surprised at Fireteam Wolfgang's CO being female, she

hid it well. Just by body type alone, there was no mistaking that there were four drell present, gender unknown, underneath TDST armor.

"Sergeant Pearce, I'm commandeering your Fireteam," Claire said a matter-of-factly.

"Of course, ma'am. All yours," she replied, even if she didn't particularly like it. Oh, well. Orders were orders.

"Our orders are to keep the enemy away from the Capital as long as possible until we can get civilians to safe zones. I've already got several of my squads assisting. You guys looking for a bit of action?"

"Hell yeah!" they chorused. Claire grinned.

"_Fireteam Wolfgang, this is TITAN command what's your status?"

—

"TITAN command this is Wolfgang-1, all reporting green."

"_Good to hear. Your Titans are prepped for launch. Call them in when ready."_

Claire gave Fireteam Wolfgang a look that said to call them in now. Nodding, they gripped their MA6A Assault Rifles and aimed a green laser at different points in the grassy field. It showed as a green "Launchpad" with a titan indicator on Claire's HUD.

"_You got it__**.**_** Standby for TITANFALL**."

Six objects began falling out of the sky at terminal velocity. Aided by boosters the objects began to fall even faster and then at about 300 meters above the ground, the meteor shaped objects expanded outward, dropping two Stryders, Three Atlases, and one Ogre. All six titans were covered in a bubble shield. Unfortunately, six TDST would have to hitch a ride on top of a TITAN of their choosing. It was a common strategy. Some TDST would travel on foot first during deployments and others would be in Titans. They switched places during the mission depending on operational needs. Titans couldn't travel in tight corners or inside, so it was to be expected.

"Standard formation and then—" Claire was cut off as she was knocked off her feet by an explosion, her energy shields flaring.

"Holy shit!" A TDST operative cursed. "The fuck was that?"

Claire glanced up at the sky and VISR 5.5 showed her that _hundreds_ of fighters and dropships were headed their way. Her eyes widened. Had they plowed through their defenses that quickly? Granted, the Pact wasn't even anywhere near the Alliance in strength, but this was ridiculous!

"Everyone, TITANS! NOW!" Her Stryder came up to her and put her back inside of it. Checking diagnostics, she found nothing was damaged, except for her shields, which had been depleted by the explosion. She didn't bother waiting for them to charge. A lower ranking TDST, a

Corporal James Ramirez, hitched a ride on top of her Stryder by climbing up her legs.

"Mind giving me a lift, ma'am?" he spoke over the TITANCOM, a bit playfully.

"Hope you got a good grip, Corporal," she replied giving a small grin.

"Don't worry about me, just give me something to shoot at!"

"All Stryders on me! Atlases in the middle!" Claire ordered as the Corporal hung on for dear life as the TDST Captain pushed her Stryder to its top speed of nearly 50 KPH.

Taking aim at one of the alien dropships, Claire aimed her XOTBR-16 chain gun and pressed the trigger on her joystick. Hundreds of 20x99mm rounds coated with plasma tore through one alien ship, skewing it to pieces. The left engine blew out; the ship turned on its side midair, and crashed into the grassy fields of Asilo, its occupants certainly perishing.

The pilots got smart and took evasive maneuvers, dodging the slower moving hybrid rounds the TDST were throwing at them.

"Captain! I'm detecting pure eezo cores in those ships! Scans show they barely weigh anything at all!"

Claire grimaced. Of course they did. The Alliance used eezo too, but that was mainly for space combat and ship ordnance. It didn't see much use in groundside operations, at least not yet anyhow.

"Acknowledged. Wolfgang-4."

The alien dropships seemed to ignore them completely, suggesting they didn't have weapons on-board. They were focused on flying inland to the heart of the capital city. The lone TDST piloting the Ogre tried futilely to shoot them down beforehand.

"Enough, Sergeant!" Pearce's voice came over TITANCOM. "Conserve your ammo. There's not much we can do."

"But, ma'am!"

"I got contacts! Lots of 'em!" On Claire's HUD, there were dozens of red dots to their left inside a village, where navigating a Stryder would prove challenging, let alone an Ogre.

Claire made a decision. She pressed two icons. She was ejected from her Stryder and a computerized voice said. "Engaging Follow Mode."

"Corporal Ramirez! You're with me!" Claire ordered. The TDST pilot nodded and the two practically sprinted in the near village.

"Fireteam Wolfgang, this is TITAN Command, a dozen more alien frigates just landed topside. You better get these bastards. Our civilians are being slaughtered or taken." _

"Taken?" Claire replied confusedly as she boosted up a wall and ran it for four meters, jumped off it to another wall, and climbed up to a rooftop. Ramirez wasn't too far behind her. Both of their shields flared as they took cover on either side, but not before they could get a good look at their invaders.

Claire was a one-species type of woman, but even she acknowledges some of the better-looking aliens she worked with, particularly Tarius Krios and some Sangheili. These aliens were repulsively ugly. They were humanoid, had four black eyes, and had weird shaped heads. They were shouting obscenities she couldn't quite make out.

"Ramirez, turn your translation software on!" She laid down some suppressive fire with her MA6A.

"Ya nadil! La 'afham!"

"Come on..." Claire watched as the software was doing its magic. 85%...90%...100%. There! Had to give to the eggheads. Sure knew their stuff.

"_You will not win! For everyone you save we will enslave a hundred more! You are now property of the Batarian Hegemony!" _

Claire and Ramirez's eyes widened. They attacked Zestiria simply for _slaves_? She gripped her assault rifle and went into a silent rage. Every last one of these fuckers was going to die. Plain and simple.

Ramirez threw a flashbang, blinding the Batarian soldiers. Wasting zero time, both TDST operatives put all four soldiers down with Hybrid 7.62mm rounds. The kinetic barriers of the Batarians were completely bypassed and punctured their armor, to their immense surprise. There were a few twitches when they fell to the ground, but they died soon after.

Claire was about to step over their bodies and jumped off the rooftop to another one before Ramirez spoke aloud. "Well, that's weird."

"What is it?" Claire inquired as she watched him scan their bodies.

"VISR 5.5 is detecting small mass effect fields projected from tiny emitters all over their corpses. It's a repelling force that's is still active and if my readings are correct, fully charged."

Claire's eyes widened at the implication. "Are you saying that our weapons actually bypass their shielding technology?" How that was even possible, Claire really didn't know, nor did she honestly care.

Ramirez gave her a grin and pulled a 7.62 round from the corpse of the slavers. "Proof is in the pudding." The Captain was immediately on the radio.

"_TITAN Command, this Wolfgang-0. I've have valuable intel that needs

to be passed to every single Alliance operative on this planet!" _

* * *

><p>Farix Mountains, near the Zestirian North Pole

"**LNOS" secret facility. **

Near the North Pole of Zesteria it could only be described as nothing but all out war. The Caleans were holding up a defensive line keeping the Batarians pinned down, forcing a sort of stalemate. Why the four-eyed aliens wanted these mountains was a mystery, but that didn't stop the bastards from trying.

The Kings had ordered them to fight to the last man to defend it and for good reason. Farix was the location of "LNOS" a secret facility hidden deep within the mountain ranges in the North Pole. What exactly was inside was classified at the highest of levels. Not even the Office of Alliance Intelligence knew what was going on. The only piece of confirmed intelligence was the name of the facility, codenamed "LNOS". The Pact absolutely refused to share what they were working on with the Alliance.

Gaining for close quarters combat, a Calean turned off his natural camouflage and opened his jaw to bite a massive chunk out of a Batarian's neck, spewing blood and gore everywhere. Hundreds of rounds were piercing his skin, but he paid it no mind as he rushed the aliens who would dare invade his home. Dozens of his brothers and sisters had bled and he would see to it they would feel his wrath tenfold.

Pure adrenaline rushed through the lizard alien as he ripped heads off, tore off limbs, tanked shots point blank, and in general showing barbarism. Taking cover for once, he allowed himself to breathe a bit before firing shots from his rifle, suppressive fire. Hearing a roar in the distance, the Calean smiled cruelly. Fucking _finally_.

Seemingly out of nowhere, a giant metal foot slammed on top of a Batarian tank, crushing the occupants like they were annoying insects. It was a REX, the Pact's bipedal tank, that was easily 15 meters tall, much more massive than the Alliance's Ogres TITANS, but a great deal smaller than MAWLRS. REX tanks were controlled either by a single pilot or an Artificial Intelligence. A large railgun on its right side plus a plethora of defense options made it a deadly weapons platform that was difficult to take down.

Mass Accelerator rounds bounced harmlessly off REX as the pilot began to slaughter the Batarian invaders. Bodies piled up in the snow as the kinetic weapons tore through armor and bone. Less than five minutes after the REX showed up on the battlefield it was already over.

Crouching down, the Rex powered down and the cockpit opened. The pilot was a Draxian.

"Thanks for the help...?"

"Zola. Armen Zola," the Draxian replied, giving out his name and

shaking the Caelean he had saved's, claw.

"Jax." He looked over at the carnage Zola had made. "Quite the mess you made."

"I only wish there were more of these disgusting creatures for me to slaughter," he venomously intoned.

"Agreed. Do you know of the situation in orbit? I've been here the entire time, was wonder if you could give me some updates."

Zola shook his head. "Not good. Our RMDs (Reverse Magnetic Deflectors) provided little protection against their weapons. We could certainly cause damage, but any ship that was hit, was effectively taken out of the fight. Most of the kills were credited to the Destroyers the Alliance had stationed here."

"What's their status?"

Zola frowned.

"...I see."

"In any case, they've landed hundreds of thousands of troops all over the planet and their taking as many of my people hostage and loading them up off world."

Jax growled. "Slavers."

"Exactly," Zola confirmed. "Millions are dead worldwide already or captured. They knew exactly when and where to hit us."

"You make it sound like a conspiracy."

"I'm not," he defended. "But in any case, we have a mess on our hands. We need to hold out until the Alliance gets here."

Jax grunted. As much as he hated to admit it, the Pact needed help and even if he hated the Alliance's underhanded tactics to get his people to submit, he wasn't too prideful to ask for help, when the alternative was to just sit by and let Zestiria fall.

Zestirian fighter jets streaked passed them overhead, obviously being launched from inside "LNOS" base.

"I need to go. I still have a job to do as I'm sure you do as well," Zola said as he climbed back into his REX.

"Aye," Jax retorted as he watched the engines come online and the REX sped off at speeds that shouldn't have been possible with its size. Sparing another glance at the Batarian corpses two important questions lingered in the Caeleans head:

Why the hell were the Batarians trying to take this mountain? How had they even known it was even valuable at all?

(Line Break)

Slipspace transit, Onboard the Autumn class-cruiser SSV Dawn of an Era

O-Deck, November 1**st****, 2167**

Commander John-117 stepped out of the rotating machines that had attached his MJOLNIR Mark XII. The Mark XII was used exclusively by SPARTAN-IIs and SPARTAN-IIIs with revolutionary shielding, armor, weapons systems and various other upgrades. Each of the Mark XIIs was customized to fit each Spartan wearing its strengths, while minimizing their weak points. For example, Kelly's version emphasized speed and agility that put the even the best TDST pilots to shame. She could now run at twice her original speed of 62kph. Layers within the armor kept her Achilles heel from being torn, something John never wished to experience again.

For John himself, he was extremely well rounded so his armor was customized to be a balanced for every situation. His boots made a clanking sound with every step he took. Rounding the corner, he ran into Tenu Ryuum, the leader of the Sangheili Ghosts.

"Ah, Commander," the 8'6 alien said, sizing up humanity's hero. "That armor suits you well. I look forward to battling you in a contest with it."

John nodded to the elite. "As do I," John replied sincerely. "But we have much more pressing matter at hand until we can do so."

"Yes, the vagrants who dare decide to spill the blood of our Zestirian allies. For this insult, they will pay," Tenu vowed, clenching his fist as they walked the hallways of the _SSV Dawn of an Era_. The _Era_ was an expensive, multipurpose stealth Autumn-class heavy cruiser that acted as the OMEGA soldier's mobile headquarters, until construction of the _Daedalus_ and _Olympus_ finished. The Era had impressive amounts of firepower, with Plasma Torpedoes, Hyperion-II nuclear warheads, a Triple Fusion Reactor, A mark XI heavy coil MAC system with an onboard eezo core, as well as 3 meters thick of Titanium-A3 armor. The slipspace drive was highly state of the art, almost as fast as the Infinity, at 1500 LY per day. It was for this reason that they'd be the first ones to arrive after Lasky mopped the floor with any alien fleet in space.

"A little bloodthirsty aren't we, Tenu?" Cortana spoke over Chief's external speakers.

"Construct, explaining the thrill of battle would be an alien concept to you."

"How much would you want to bet?" she challenged the Spec Ops Officer.

"Cortana, stop it." John's annoyance at his best friend's behavior was abundantly clear in his tone of voice. Tenu only chuckled, but conveniently shutting up as they came through a pair of doors.

Inside, there were a few persons already waiting for them, sitting at a table made of mahogany. They were General Nikolai Dragovich, Captain Sarah Palmer, SPARTAN-II Jerome-092, and the only OMEGA super soldier in the room, was the leader of Fireteam ARCLIGHT, a fireteam of six candidates that John recognized as the best of out of an already elite group of soldiers. Essentially, ARCLIGHT, was the

OMEGA's equivalent of Blue Team for the SPARTAN-IIs, NOBLE for the IIIs, and Fireteams Majestic and Crimson for the SPARTAN-IVs. There was a period of time where John had exclusively instructed them personally along with Tennu.

Fireteam ARCLIGHT's leader was armored in EXCALIBUR Powered Assault Armor. Although they had similar features, EXCALIBUR was meant to be mass-produced in large quantities not individually customized like the Mark XII.

"Glad you could join us, Commander, Tennu," Dragovich's Russian accent intoned.

"Sir!" John saluted apologetically. Being tardy was seldom an action he did. Dragovich waved him off and told him to have a seat. Both Sangheili and Spartan did so without another word.

The room darkened. "As you all know, at approximately 0700 standard time, the Zestirian homeworld came under an attack by an alien faction who call themselves the "Batarian Hegemony". Judging from our updates and intelligence, we believe they are not after resources, but instead wish to enslave the entire populace," Dragovich gravely reported. John gripped chair, almost snapping it, in barely restrained fury.

The General continued. "As of now, we believe the planet may have been overrun, and that enemy troop numbers may number in the millions, not hundreds of thousands as we previously thought. Which tells us one thing..."

"This was well planned and organized before hand," Jerome replied, catching on.

"Indeed. We don't know how long they've been studying the Pact or even their methods of how, but they attacked with an overwhelming force, knowing they were dealing with a homeworld, not a simple colony. "

The room lit back up again and Dragovich looked extremely tired of dealing with by-the-book procedures of this briefing. "You know what...fuck this. I'm going to keep this short, sweet, to the point. Director Xavier has authorized every OMEGA soldier we can spare to retake Zestiria and liberate any POWs."

"What's our rule of engagement, General?" Palmer asked, as a formality, knowing the Alliance's zero tolerance of slavery of any kind.

Dragovich smiled. "That's easy Captain. There are no rules. We already have N7 forces with capture missions of High-Value targets. You on the other hand...do not. As of this moment, all OMEGA are under orders to take ZERO prisoners and to slaughter these bastards to the last man. Anything that doesn't look like a human, drell, Sangheili, Caele, or Draxian, you are to terminate with extreme prejudice."

"Fireteam ARCLIGHT and Blue Team will assist NOBLE team in extraction of the Kings."

"Sir!" Acknowledged both John and ARCLIGHT's leader,

simultaneously.

"Red Team, Ghosts are to report near the equator. One of the last intelligence updates from the _Come My Way_ reported an enemy Forward Operating Base being hastily set up to launch a massive invasion of the mainland. Stop them at all costs."

"By the blades of our ancestors, we shall not fail, General," Tenu beat his chest in conviction.

"Good. You're all dismissed!" All of the occupants stood in the room and saluted, then left the room with haste to debrief their own teams.

John and ARCLIGHT's leader turned to the right heading towards the armory.

"Suit up, and debrief your team," he ordered. With a nod, his pseudo protogã sprinted ahead, eager to prove himself to the Master Chief.

"It's been awhile, Chief. Gonna be like old times, eh?" Cortana quipped, eager to put her skills as an AI to uses other than writing laws, coming up with plans, schematics, and the like.

John cracked his neck. He hadn't seen any serious action in well over twenty years. He'd be lying if he said he wasn't anxious to get back into the fight.

"Just like old times."

* * *

><p>All right, I'm soooo sorry this took awhile to get out! I was busy doing some out processing and haven't had much time to write. I don't know when the next chapter will be out, but it's not going to be on my two-week schedule that's for sure.<p>

I hope I did all right for the battle scenes. I'm still not entirely comfortable with them as I specialize in lore, world building, characters, and plot development.

****IMPORTANT: IF you have submitted an OMEGA OC for Fireteam Arclight, if you have the time, please send an updated profile with all of the new information that I provided in this chapter. If you haven't submitted one, and would like too, this is absolutely THE last chapter I'll consider one. Longer it is, more chance it'll be accepted. I need name, what Special Forces unit on Earth they were in before OMEGA, personality, appearance, battle tactics, and weapons used.****

Next chapter! Infinity arrives!

****Codex: ****

****OMEGA Regiments:****

****141****st**** Stray Dogs (Specialists)****

****85****th**** Titan Fists (TITAN Mech specialists)**

**

****200****th****** Titanium Rain (Orbital Drop Shock Assault Troopers)**

****111****th****** Dead Stars (Space Combat)**

****8****th****** Armored (Armored Tanks and Heavy Vehicles)**

****75****th****** Tempest Cloaks (Reconnaissance and Assassination)
**

****321****st****** Falling Seraphs (Orbital Assault Troopers)**

****501****st****** Black Fist (Heavy Infantry)**

****662****nd****** Shadow Company (Spec Ops) **

****706****th****** War Hammers (Medium Infantry)**

****345****th****** Storm Raiders (Light Infantry)**

****Fireteam ARCLIGHT:**** A Elite Fireteam within the OMEGA supersoldier program. Arclight is a six-man team and considered to be the best soldiers in the Alliance, outside of the UNSC and Sangheili Ghosts.

****Zestiria**:** Homeworld of the Draxian and Caleans, this planet is located, relatively, in the center of the Skyllian Verge, in the Vixa System. Although, technically, not as rich in element zero pound-for-pound as Thessia, there is enough of the substance to give the asari homeworld a run for its money. A single day on Zestiria lasts about 32 hours along with a 390-day orbital period around its star.

****IFTA**:** The Interstellar Free Trade Agreement is the formal name of the intertwining of the Systems Alliance and Zestirian Pact's economies. Although, their economy was exponentially smaller than the Alliance, the Draxian and Caleans are quickly catching up fast. There are an estimated 800 human conglomerates that have factories and smaller corporations both on the Zestirian homeworld and its limited amount of colonies. Zestiria has a dozen or so headquarters on Eden Prime, Axiom Prime, Freedom's Progress, Taurus-4, and even a limited amount on Earth.

****REX**:** The Zestirian Pact created this mobile automated mechanized bipedal assault in the 2120s. It is crewed by a single pilot or Artificial Intelligence. The REX has dozens of missile pods that are "created" by an element zero core combined with dark energy, effectively giving it unlimited ammunition. On its right side exists a rail gun, that not only can function as a weapon in and of itself, but can fire a nuclear warhead. The Systems Alliance calls it the "Rex" for it's somewhat similar appearance to the Tyrannosaurus Rex. In 2166, the Alliance and Pact are jointly developing a replacement that can be outfitted with energy shielding and can be dropped from orbit.

****U.R.S.C:**** The United Races Space Command is the pending name of

the military alliance of several alien species allied with humanity. Should, however, the Zestirian Pact, ever come under the Systems Alliance banner, the Alliance military would no longer just be "the Alliance", but the URSC. In similar case to the UNSC, the URSC would be the military, scientific, and exploratory arm of all races, while the "Alliance" would be the civilian government who funds them. If implemented the URSC would consist of the following races: Human, Drell, Sangheili, Unggoy, Mgalekgolo, Huragok, Draxian, and Calean.

****"LNOS"****: A secret facility, buried deep within the mountains of Farix, nears the north pole of Zesteria. This facility's activities are kept ultra-top secret and the Pact absolutely refuses to let anyone know what is being worked on there. Even the Alliance has no idea what secrets are buried within the mountains as the Pact has bleeding edge tech designed to prevent even the UNSC Infinity from scanning what's down there. The only known intel that's confirmed about the facility that its codename is "LNOS". The Calean who supplied the Alliance that information died in a training "accident" a few days later.

****Reverse Magnetic Deflectors****: Reverse Magnetic Deflectors, nicknamed RMDs or MDs, are standard "shielding" for Zestirian Ships. Even as of 2167, selling energy shielding tech is strictly illegal by embargos by the Alliance Parliament until certain concessions are made by the Pact, who've so far, refused to comply. However, the Pact came up with a simple, yet surprisingly effective way around it. RMDs, like their namesake implies, cover Pact ships in a magnetic field centimeters from the hull. To prevent small objects and personnel from being repelled during maintenance and other activities, RMDs work on the principle of "Smart" magnetism. The core that projects the field has precise mechanics where the field only "activates" when an object traveling at relativistic speeds (such as a MAC round or Mass Accelerator Round) is detected. The hull Pact ships is relatively thin, compared to the Alliance, which makes them vulnerable to missile fire. This is compensated by FIRESTORM laser point-defense network.

****Light Advance Inertial Recoil Damper****: Also known as LAIRD, this is an experimental system made by the Pact to increase their effectiveness, by using hydraulic recoil buffers to absorb the recoil of each shot.

****EXCALIBUR Powered Assault Armor****: Jointly developed by the Alliance and UNSC, EXCALIBUR is the armor used for the System Alliance's OMEGA super soldier program. Although the armor is somewhat similar to the MJOLNIR Mark XII in terms of features, the main difference between the two armor systems was EXCALIBUR was intended to be mass produced for a variety of soldiers, while the Mark XII was individually suited to each of the UNSC's SPARTAN-IIs and IIIs, to enhance their strengths, areas of expertise and mitigate their "weaknesses". Because of this, EXCALIBUR is cheaper and easier to produce.

****MA6A ICWS HAR****: The MA6A Individual Combat Weapons Hybrid Assault Rifle is the newest Assault Rifle the Alliance is considering to adopt to replace the M-55, which, while effective, essentially was thrown together haphazardly when the Alliance was creating its military in hindsight. Like it's predecessor(s) the MA6A fires 7.62x54mmR rounds coated in plasma, creating a hybrid of the

Covenant's direct Energy Weapons and the piercing of the UNSC's kinetic rounds. Its magazines hold up to 64 rounds with a 900-RPM, rate of fire. Like the MA5 series, an electronic digital round counter, compass, and backlight are present, but MA6 series allows for far more customization for the preferences of the soldier with a variety of attachments and optics. The Alliance expects the MA6A to replace the M55 entirely by 2175, and expected to be phased in starting in summer of 2168, the new fiscal year. The MA6A was designed and built to stay in Alliance service, ideally, until the 24th century with upgrades.

****MA6B ICWS HAR****: While the MA6A is meant to be a standardized weapon for the Alliance Marine Corp and Army, the MA6B is a specialized, more expensive variant of the MA6B, designed for use by TDST, N7, SPARTANs, and OMEGA. Using the 10.2x51 round, usually reserved for Sniper rifles and heavy Battle rifles, the MA6B can stop even heavily armored opponents at short to medium range, even capable of stopping cars dead, or punching straight through windows, doors, and concrete. It has increased recoil that makes it difficult to handle outside of experienced hands. Usually, only the OMEGA and SPARTANs can sustain automatic fire for an extended period of time. Because it uses larger rounds, the MA6B can only hold 40 rounds.

****AA-48 ECQCS****: The AA-48 Extreme Close Quarters Combat System is a shotgun intended to replace the M90D currently in use. It resembles the 21st century's "AA-12" although it looks more akin to an assault rifle at first glance. The shotgun is able to fire both automatic and semi-automatically.

7. Of Their Own Accord Part II

****Mass Effect: The New Journey****

****Chapter Seven: ****__Of their Own Accord, Part II__

****Important Author's note!**** _ I have, after careful consideration, decided to alter the timeline in the story. As of right now, the UNSC and Separatists arrived in 2054 and currently 113 years passed between now and then. I will go back and edit to explain how in the few days after this chapter is up. You don't have to go back and read it, as it's not necessary. I'm just changing some characters that previously met the joint fleet (Xavier, Ishigami, etc) as throwaway introductory characters, so the current timeline still matches with characters I've created. But if you want the short and sweet version of how the Joint Fleet is still around after all this time, two words: Slipspace bubbles. That's all you need to know, though if you're curious about details, I'm sure you can go back and re-read everything.

Thanks to everyone who submitted an OC! Some were fantastic...others...not so much, to keep it real. If you see your character in here, congratulations!

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* * *

><p>Batarian Dreadnought, _**A Master's Will**_**,
**

November 1**st****, 2167 **

Captain Esta Va'rek of the Batarian Third Fleet smiled cruelly as he watched the planet of the primitive vermin burn as his forces tore through their lowly defenses. The _Will_ was one of _**seven**_ dreadnoughts that the Hegemony had assembled for the invasion of "Zestiria" as the races that inhabited it called it. Ordinarily, even _one_ dreadnought for a slave raid would be considered _massive_ overkill, but this time, the Batarian government wanted to attack using _professional_ _soldiers_, as they weren't just invading a backwoods colony. Oh, no, from the intelligence they had gotten (though _how_ the Hegemony obtained it was classified beyond Top Secret, even for Varek, to his annoyance) , this was a homeworld with _billions_ of potential slaves. There was not a snowball's chance in hell they would let mercenaries, gangs, and "illegal" slave rings take the planet's spoils for themselves. With that in mind, the Hegemony opted for a substantial show of force; using one-quarter of the total dreadnoughts the Navy had both officially _and_ unofficially.

"Pft, STG fools screwed over the wrong people too many times," Esta mused. While the Citadel tried, admirably, to keep the secret repeal of the Treaty of Farixen hush-hush, too many resources were being allocated to classified locations across the galaxy and it made the intention obvious. Rather than overplay their hand and call the fools out openly, the Batarians decided to rearm themselves, building more capital ships as well as training more soldiers. Undoubtedly, the Turian Hierarchy was still the superior military power. However, that didn't mean the Hegemony wouldn't give them a damn good fight if it ever came down to an unlikely war.

"Status report!" he barked.

"Four more frigates and cruisers just left their homeworld, sir," the Batarian lieutenant replied professionally. "With a hefty amount of prisoners. We're making outlike Kings!" The sociopathic officer had little empathy for the lives of the Zestirian denizens he was ruining. The ships entered FTL and like dozens of others were on their way to the Batarian homeworld.

"Excellent. Casualties?" Although he honestly couldn't care less, it was more of a formality, than anything. They would need to be replaced...eventually.

"We still have about eight million troops scattered across the planet, with about 890,000 dead or injured. The invasion of the mainland should begin in about four hours."

"Make it three," the Captain growled out. While the invasion was going better than expected, Varek still wanted their timeline sped up. Looking at his holographic images of Vixa, he had to shake his head. He had to give the vagrants some credit, their defense platforms had practically decimated the first wave of frigates and cruisers the Hegemony had sent. The silent metal coffins scattered

across the system were a testament to their power.

However, there were two ships that had held out the longest, even when the Batarians decided to use quick FTL jumps to the far side of the planet to land troops. These ships weren't big, about the average size of a cruiser, maybe a bit bigger, but the slugs they were dishing out into the void were practically wrecking his fleet. Now, granted, they were acceptable losses in the grand scheme of things, but even still. When it took six cruisers working in tandem to simply bring down two ships, it was a feat even Varek had to respect.

'_Perhaps their ships have some spoils that may have survived?' _he mused to himself. Ah, well. They'd search it later. For now, they had slaves to capture.

"Captain, Colonel Gi'lal is prepping for a massive assault on the capital city. He says their so called "Kings" will be captured within the hour he promises."

Varek couldn't help but smile maliciously. Capturing the Kings would be a tremendous spoil of war. Not only would it demoralize these vagrants to have their leaders captured, but also he'd be able to sell them to the highest bidder! Perhaps to even the Hegemony's Grand Vizier! He'd have enough credits to live like an emperor for the rest of his life, guaranteed.

"Tell the Colonel I will be very pleased when heâ€"

"Sir! Massive energy spikes!"

Varek's narrowed all four of his eyes. Reinforcements? Already? That shouldn't have been possible! Their data and intelligence was foolproof! This was supposed to be all of their ships andâ€"

His once narrowed eyes begin to slowly elongate as realization of the Hegemony's strategic error dawned on him. "Oh, no. We've been...Prepare the Fleet for immediate battle, rightâ€"!"

Varek never got a chance to finish his order. In that moment, about one hundred kilometers off of the _Will's _starboard bow, an utterly massive slipspace rupture opened up. What the crew of the invasion's flagship saw was nothing short of awe inspiring. A colossal six-kilometer ship excited the portal, heading straight for _A Master's Will_, with no signs of stopping.

And it didn't.

The UNSC _Infinity_ slammed right into the dreadnought. Infinity's primary shield flared orange, but essentially took inconsequential damage. The _Will_, however, wasn't so lucky. The _Infinity_ had mass orders of magnitude beyond its Mass Effect counterpart and the ships kinetic barriers were shattered, almost literally. The hull was breached, exposing many of the crew to the harsh and unforgiving environment of outer space. Structural integrity was lost instantaneously and through her XR2 Boglin Fields engines, _Infinity_ pushed through, snapping the once mighty dreadnought in twain, killing everyone, including Varek, immediately.

The Infinity transmitted an entire system wide message to every

single Batarian ship in orbit over Zestiria.

"_This is Admiral Thomas Lasky of the Systems Alliance aboard the SSV Infinity! You have trespassed on the territory of our Zestirian Allies and spilt innocent blood in the name of capturing slaves! Your absolutely disgusting deeds will NOT go unpunished and you and the rest of your invasion will feel the complete wrath of humanity. Pray now to whatever gods you wish, for they will not stop us from turning your fleet to __**ash**__." _

* * *

><p>UNSC Infinity

November 1**st****, 2167**

"Infinity clear of slipspace, Admiral!" Roland reported to Lasky, as if the fact that they had simply swatted away a freaking _**dreadnought**_ by ramming it with brute force was simply an insignificant point that wasn't even worth bringing up.

Lasky nodded as he accessed the situation quickly before giving orders. "Try to bring us above Kastella, I want as many of the ODST and SPARTAN-IVs off this ship!" It was an unfortunate reality. Outside of the 111th Dead Stars, Spartans and OMEGA soldiers were practically useless in space combat.

Sailing through the void, the Infinity opened up with a volley of Archer and Jericho missiles. They were targeting low level fighters and frigates that impeded the path of the Alliance's most powerful ship. The Batarian fighters tried to dodge out of the way, but it was far too late. Each Archer missile found a target and exploded with a force equal to several kilotons of TNT. Seeing as how Archers were meant for starships, not individual fighters, it was _substantial_ overkill.

The frigates fared somewhat better, if only by a margin or so. The GARDIAN defense network, mainly meant for fighters, cut down the Archer missiles one-by-one, even as they were travelling at ultrasonic speeds. The small 'victory' was short lived as the Jericho missiles swooped in. Hundreds of missiles split from themselves into ten different ones and became thousands of mini nukes. The laser point defense network was overwhelmed and the frigates exploded in a fiery display. Although their kinetic barriers would've provided some defense, the sheer volume of missile fire that the _Infinity_ was dishing out made such protection outright negligible.

"Do we have a clear jump?" Lasky asked.

"Yes, Admiral, but be warned they're going to be well within knife-fight range once we do so," Roland replied gravely. Although the A.I. was confident _Infinity_ could take this fleet head on till the Alliance arrived en-masse, they were still heavily outnumbered. There were hundreds of Batarian ships in the system of various classes and tonnage. Quantity was a quality all own its own as the old saying went.

After a split second deliberation, the de-facto leader of the UNSC/Separatists made his decision. "Do it! Have our Longswords and Broadswords ready to deploy. The moment we leave slipspace all ODST

and SPARTAN-IVs need to be off my ship, ASAP!"

"Aye, aye, Admiral!"

In one instant, the Infinity was sailing through the void and in the next, vanished into the eleven dimensions of slipspace. The dozens of Mass Accelerator slugs that would've hit the massive capital ship sailed harmlessly through the void of space, where they would hit being anyone's guess.

"Where did they go!?" demanded Captain Khuat Hanma in utter rage and disbelief. He was now in command of the Hegemony's invasion fleet, when that enormous warship appeared out of nowhere! Not only did that black "super-dreadnought" make the Destiny Ascension look like a mere frigate, when it exited some strange portal, it tore the Master's Will completely in half by just ramming it with brute force. If the Citadel's Flagship had tried to do the same thing, its hull would've been damaged and repairs would've taken weeks, if not months!

'Pray now to whatever gods you wish, for they will not stop us from turning your fleet to ash'. For the first time in years if not decades, Hanma had felt genuine fear. If this was only one of their ships, how large was the rest of their fleet?

"Unknown. Sensor's aren't picking up anything. It's like it vanished from existence!"

"Dammit!" Hanma slammed his fist on his command chair. "Sweep the system again! Find that ship so we can either blow it to smithereens or at the very least cripple the damn thing to send boarding parties!" It was practically impossible to overstate how much a valuable asset the Hegemony would have if they captured the Infinity and repurposed it for their needs.

"Sweeping," one the technicians replied, nervously typing on his console. The reading on the board above them all said the same thing: the Infinity was gone. "I'm sorry, sir, but that ship isâ€"!"

"Massive spike on our starboard side!"

All four Hanma's eyes widened as the slipspace portal appeared again, just as it had a few moments ago before A Master's Will was snapped in half. Were they going to attempt the same tactic as before? He wasn't going to allow them the chance. "FTL! Now! Coordinates Zeta Two-Four-Eight!"

"Acknowledged," one of his officers answered, entering the necessary coordinates, before pressing an icon on his control pad. Not even half a second afterwards, Hanma's dreadnought made a quick FTL jump 100,000 kilometers away from the Infinity before Lasky could destroy it.

The other ships near Hanma weren't so lucky. Some were ran over, but a good fifty ships consisting of frigates and cruisers moved out of the way simply by using their regular engines. It was clear their individual commanders weren't even close to half as competent and quick thinking as their current commander was.

"All ships! Open fire!"

Dozens of Mass Accelerator Rounds escaped the barrels of the canons of the Batarian ships, who had time to reposition themselves to target the massive black ship. All of them were confident that with such a barrage of fire that the Infinity would be crippled, if not outright destroyed. Satisfied grins turned into complete despair when the slugs impacted the massive six-kilometer ship's Forerunner grade energy shielding, shattering on impact.

"Shielding holding at 57%, Admiral!" Roland reported.

Lasky grinned. "Now it's our turn!"

The UNSC born Admiral didn't even bother spinning up the four Series-8 MAC cannons, knowing that such an action was a disaster in the making at such knife-fight range. As the UNSC found out during the various wars with the Jiralhanae and Jul M'dama, the upgraded Post-Covenant War MAC guns that were retrofitted to nearly every starship in the UNSC Navy were exponentially superior to their pre-war designs...at a cost. They released a tremendous amount of energy even if the target was obliterated, as that energy had to go somewhere, usually backwards in a pseudo-recoil way. That's why there was a minimum "safe" distance to use the MAC on starships above destroyer class. Using a weapons platform as powerful as the Series-8 right now would be tantamount to complete suicide. In the best case scenario Infinity's shielding would be obliterated and even the thickest parts of its Titanium-A3 hull would melt away and in the worse she'd be destroyed outright. Considering Infinity's sheer size and strategic importance to the Alliance, it would take months of repairs to make her combat capable once more.

For this reason, this was exactly why the UNSC and by extension the Alliance had been heavily investing researching in close-range starship weaponry to compensate. On her portside several dozen mass drivers nicknamed "Mini-MACs" opened fire with their Onager salvos at Batarian ships as close as 100 kilometers to the gargantuan UNSC created vessel, along with hundreds of M41 HAILSTORM heavy deck guns. Kinetic barriers were design to stop weapons that traveled at relativistic speeds. These weapons were far too slow for the primitive shielding to even detect, let alone impede.

In a seemingly one-two punch, one slug from a HAILSTORM caught a cruiser at its 'wingtip', blowing its left engine out, staggering it 'sideways' relative to Infinity and a second slug from a Mini-MAC obliterated it by snapping it in half. The frigates fared even worse. Unlike the cruisers, which were simply obliterated on impact of the powerful point-defense system, the slugs decimated any of them in single shots. In a similar sense to the capabilities of the Orbital Defense Platforms above Earth and Axiom Prime, one heavy deck slug pierced through one frigate, destroying it, penetrated a second, and crippled a third, life support being lost. Not that it mattered in the slightest. Roland put the crippled Batarian ship out of its misery with a Mini-MAC, reducing its crew to ash just as Lasky had promised.

"All ships fleeing knife-fight range Admiral," a technician reported, stoically.

'They aren't using their method of Faster-than-light travel,' Lasky

thought calculative. What kind of game were these aliens playing? He honestly half-expected them to leave, but they stuck around to bitter end despite Infinity's overwhelming firepower. Were they going for a different strategy? He suppressed a scowl. These bastards were annoying the hell out of him.

"They're out of range sir, but still too close for our MAC guns," Roland reported.

"Sir, Archer and Jericho pods 134-218 are still hot and ready to fire!"

Of course they were. Archer and Jericho missiles could reach the ships in time, even if their onboard Element Zero core didn't lower their mass. Lasky, however, had something far different in mind.

"Lieutenant, fire up Infinity's THOR Laser," Lasky ordered his weapon system officer.

"Ye-yes yes sir!" she replied, not even bother trying to hide her shock.

"Admiral..." Roland stared at Lasky his tone was of disbelief. "Are you sure that's wise? That weapon system isâ€"

"Classified, I'm well aware of that," the Admiral rolled his eyes. Along with the SUPERNOVA warheads that were capable of obliterating the entire Sol System, THOR was the other weapon system that the UNSC and Separatists had refused to give to the Alliance, not that they knew about both weapon systems existence in the first place. It was a very powerful energy projector that was, in layman's terms, an oversized SPARTAN Laser that was mounted on a starship.

Although at first glance one might consider it similar to the Plasma Accelerator Canon or PAC currently mounted on the _SSV Atlas_ they really were worlds apart. THOR was essentially a deadly laser that had an internal particle accelerator to adjust beam wavelength. The deadly weapon induced hypervelocity vaporization in all currently known forms of armor and effectively created an explosion within the ship at temperatures exceeding even the focal point of a nuclear explosion. As a result, practically anything caught on the receiving end of the weapon would be erased from existence. Not even a fully shielded Covenant Supercarrier could survive.

"Sir, what if the Alliance does an investigation andâ€"

"Roland, I'm aware of the risk. We don't have a choice at the moment." They honestly didn't. Sensors were picking up more ships.

The AI audibly sighed, nodding his consent. "If this backfires..."

"I'll take full responsibility," Lasky nodded, turning towards his faithful lieutenant, he gave her the go ahead. She returned the gesture and typed on her console.

"Target distance?"

"They're about 60,000 kilometers and counting, Admiral!"

"Lieutenant...fire up THOR...and bring the lightning!"

From the nose of Infinity, two large parallel hatches fifteen feet in diameter opened by splitting six ways each. A pair of "holes" was now clearly visible in the bow of the ship. A great vortex of energy gathered in the two forward emitters, as the THOR laser turned from white to cobalt blue. Then with a violent flash of light, similar to the SPARTAN laser, the THOR lanced out into the void of space towards the retreating Batarian ships.

In all of their experience in warfare and centuries as a space ferrying race, the Batarians would not be prepared in the slightest for the rain of destruction worthy of a _God_.

THOR shot right through a flotilla of cruisers like a needle through tissue paper. The kinetic barriers were completely bypassed as if they were never truly there. In a nanosecond the slavers were cooked, as their armor boiled away at temperatures exceeding 30 million degrees. Adjusting the emitters, they "tilted" downwards and the beam caught several frigates, boiling them in a hot flash. THOR didn't stop there. Even as the emitter "died" down, the laser continued on for tens of thousands of kilometers. One Batarian dreadnought that was hidden behind a large asteroid, was pierced through as both it and the space rock were effectively obliterated out of existence.

The entire process lasted three, five seconds tops. Using the Onager and Point defense networks, Infinity was able to destroy the invasion force with relative ease. THOR was an outright _massacre_. Every single ship within Infinity's range was completely atomized. Nothing was left of the retreating ships except violently twirling dust clouds.

"Enemy neutralized, Admiral."

"Excellent. Fine work there, Lieutenant," he praised. The El-Tee blushed at his words, but nodded in thanks.

"Roland, sweep the system."

"Already done, Admiral. You want the good news or bad news?"

"Give it to me straight, Roland."

"Good news is THOR was able to destroy a good chunk of their fleet."

"The bad news?"

"Well...plenty. We took a hell of a beating with hundreds of slugs hitting us. Our shields are down to less than 8% and that's the second layer. We take a couple more hits and Infinity will be putting its hull to the test. THOR also did a number on our engines, she won't be able to fire for another four minutes or so. Then there's this..."

On the holotable, the map of the Vixa system zoomed out. Lasky

grimaced. The entire fleet was closing in; obviously reserves that guarded the outer rim of the system were joining with the ships tasked with planetary assault. They were going all out.

"I see. How many are there?"

"...Around seven hundred...sir."

Terrific. Just what he needed.

"How long till they're in range?"

"ETA about three minutes and counting."

Lasky silently moved the hardlight holographic images around with his hands, showing Zestiria. On the table Infinity was calculated to be directly above megacity of Kastella. The Admiral made his decision. "All right, here's what we're going to do. I want all of our ODST to drop right now, as well as any SPARTAN-IV teams on the ship. They are ordered to engage the enemy and assist any ground forces to the best of their abilities."

"Aye, Aye Admiral!"

"Strident 1-9 will assist us here in orbit, as well as all available Saber and Katana pilots. Broadsword and Longsword pilots are to assist Strident 10 planet side and help repel the invaders."

Near the stern side of the Infinity, ten hatches opened, an energy barrier protecting the crew chiefs from the harsh environment of space. Given the go-ahead, ten Strident-class Heavy Frigates launched from their bays, spinning up their MAC guns simultaneously. Four frigates boosted themselves "up" relative to Infinity on her portside fifty kilometers and the other five did so on her starboard side. All nine ships were in staggered formations.

Per Lasky's orders, a tenth frigate headed straight for the planet to assist the complement of HEV pods filled with ODST and SPARTAN-IVs and fighters Infinity had launched. The frigate, the SSV Omaha (formerly UNSC Omaha), call sign Badger-Two would be in the upper atmosphere of Zestiria and would provide orbital support for ground forces above Kastella and any captured territory.

"All pods descending Admiral. Virtually no combat personnel are here." Lasky knew what that meant. In the unlikely event that Infinity was boarded, there would be very little protection.

"Understood. Roland, can you provide cyber warfare and hack their ships?"

"I would love to, Admiral," he responded sarcastically. "But do you have any idea how complex Forerunner technology is? I'm spending a good chunk of my processing power just keeping this whole ship running as smooth as I can considering we're running a goddamn skeleton crew, along with coordinating with you and everyone else. I might be able to do something, but if you want to maximize my capabilities, we'll have to do this the old fashioned way."

Lasky knew he was right. Roland may have been built to, literally, do

a million things at once, but even he had his limits, especially since he was doing tasks that humans usually did when the ship had a full crew. Until the Alliance built an A.I comparable to Contender-class Forerunner ancilla (a few centuries off even at the most optimistic estimation), Roland's capabilities in the present situation were ironically limited.

"They're closing in, sir!"

"Then let us meet them halfway. We're going to keep their attention on us and not the planet." On his map he pointed to an area several hundred million kilometers from their position. "Roland, make a micro jump here. I want our MACs spun up. Fire as soon as we exit."

Roland acknowledged his order and relayed it to the Strident frigates. Ten slipspace ruptures smoothly cut a hole in the fabric of space and the ships sailed through. As they pushed through, Lasky silently wished the ground team good luck. He'd hold them off as long as he could till the Alliance came to reinforce him. For now, he had a fleet to annihilate.

* * *

><p>Kastella, Central Business District

November 1**st****, 2167**

Everything was on fire. Scorching flames lit up the evening sky as if the very clouds themselves were set aflame. Monorails were derailed and some of the cars were crashed into edifices, trapping any unlucky soul unfortunate enough to be in the wrong place at the wrong time. All throughout the streets there were crash sites upon crash sites: Batarian dropships, Zestirian fighter jets, Alliance Rapiers. Inside the canopies were ashes of the former sapient beings that had controlled these majestic and technologically advanced fighters...and they were the lucky ones. The others whose bodies have survived intact still burned away, even though the life within them had long since perished.

Screams of terror echoed throughout the burning district as slavers and soldiers either captured or killed Zestirian or Alliance citizens. Draxian, Caelean, Human, Drell, it didn't matter.

"Dammit, did anything survive all of this?" Nathan-B312 muttered as he hunkered down behind cover, perfectly concealed. To his left was his old friend and Radar Intercept Officer, Jorge. The SPARTAN-II had his trademarked Heavy Machine Gun that had gone through extensive upgrades over the years.

"Quiet, Six," came the voice of Carter through the radio, although there were traces of static similar to how some radio stations in the 21st century's AM frequency had sound quality. Noble Six acknowledged the order without a snarky comeback.

"Jun, do you have anything on your scope?" Kat, or Noble Two inquired, looking at the roof of a building five stories high.

"Affirmative, I got two dozen foot mobiles. Seems like they're receiving orders at a small Forward Operating base about 3 clicks

from here," he replied as he was gazing through the scope of a SRS-99 Hybrid Sniper Rifle. His MA6A assault rifle was magnetically attached to his back having no use for it right now. "We can avoid them easily." He marked a NAV point for the team to follow to avoid the Batarian soldiers.

"Acknowledged, Noble-Three," acknowledged Carter. "Move out, NOBLE, we still have a job to do."

Nathan and Jorge grunted, but nonetheless followed their orders without hesitation. Just as the SPARTAN-II predicted, their mission to rescue the Kings went straight to hell almost the moment their Pegasus dropship landed. Just as he hated fighting in New Alexandria on Reach, Nathan hated urban combat in Kastella, especially considering Kastella's sheer gargantuan size dwarfed the metropolitan city by a factor of twenty. They couldn't make a straight line toward the palace as they had to make several detours due to destroyed buildings, collapsed bridges, damaged roadways.

The Super soldiers had inflicted heavy casualties to the Batarian in a form of both direct action heavy assault and guerilla hit and run tactics. These actions had liberated Caelean and Draxian soldiers, whose primitive armor lack of shielding put them at a sizable disadvantage compared to their invading counterparts. All of the city was being besieged, inside and out as Zestirian citizens fought to retake entire _street corners_, with ferocious resolve. They absolutely refused to give in to the invaders who were ransacking their home with the intent to enslave their race. To say that the battle of Kastella was reminiscent of the battle of Stalingrad during the Second World War would be the understatement of the decade. To make matters even worse, the Batarians had set up various jamming rigs around the city, making communication difficult, air-to-air missiles from fighters swerve into buildings, causing friendly fire. How the four-eyed aliens were communicating themselves was a mystery, but somehow they were still coordinating assaults in various strategic locations. Technologically inferior to the Alliance they may have been, but they were crafty bastards and extremely annoying, using tactics straight out the Insurrectionists' playbook.

Carter's active camouflage deactivated as he suddenly "appeared" out of nowhere with Kat and Emile flanking him. Noble Six and Noble Five had their six, with Nathan making sure his MA6A had a full clip of 64 7.62 High-Density Hybrid Rounds.

Jun, after activating some active camouflage, sprinted from rooftop to rooftop landing in a barrel roll each time and quickly scanning the area with his sniper rifle.

At the ground level, NOBLE team fell into a staggered formation a few meters apart, moving quickly and efficiently through the urban jungle. Bodies of civilians, from both governments, lined the street. Those the Batarians couldn't capture they executed without hesitation. These brave souls had fought to the end, even though they had no armor to protect them from the mass accelerator rounds from the Hegemony. Emile silently gripped his AA-48, barely containing his bloodlust and want for revenge. Not even when he was sent on missions in Innies territory did he slaughter innocent civilians! The list of war crimes these bastards had committed in just 24 hours would fill an entire encyclopedia.

Emile felt a grip on his shoulder. He was a bit startled but turned to his head sideways to stare at Kat. She did a slow nod. Even SPARTAN-IIIs had their own form of non-verbal communication. He sighed and calmed down, knowing she was right. He had to focus.

They were about to turn another block before Jun stopped them.

"What do you see Jun?"

"TDST soldiers, looks like a small fireteam. They could use our help and its on the way."

"Show us."

In a corner of NOBLE team's HUD, a video screen of questionable quality played, linking what Jun was seeing and projecting it to NOBLE.

It was a pretty intense firefight. One Draxian soldier was being treated for an injury by a TDST medic, who was trying his best to keep his head down. Unlike the usual dozens of TITAN mechs, the heavy fighting had reduced the numbers down to exactly one: a lone Atlas mech and judging from its outward appearance, heavily damaged. Kat doubted its shielding even functioned at this point. Three humans and a drell TDST were valiantly laying waste to as many Batarian soldiers as they could.

"They're going to be overrun, commander," Nathan said, stating the obvious.

"And it's about to get worse. Gunship heading their way!" Jun practically shouted.

Carter made his decision. "Go, NOBLE!" Every member of NOBLE team took off in a sprint to aid their comrades.

* * *

><p>"Ramirez! You got any smokes?" Claire shouted laying down some suppressive fire, forcing a Batarian soldier into cover behind a piece of concrete that had formerly been part of the road they were fighting on.<p>

"I'm out, ma'am!" he cried out firing along with the Captain.

"Dammit!" Claire cursed, turning her back, and then sliding down behind cover as her magazine went empty. Within the span of four seconds, she smashed the magazine release and put a fresh clip in, locking the bolt back to chamber a Hybrid round in her M55C Enhanced Battle Rifle. She stood back up carefully and aimed her rifle center mass. She fired a three round burst. The round pierced through the concrete, along with the coated plasma burning the rock for even easier penetration. The slug exited through the soldier's neck, blowing out his esophagus. He fell to the ground dead in a pool of his own blood.

"Dunn, please tell me he's going to make it!" a sergeant shouted to the medic treating the Draxian who was going in and out of consciousness.

"He is! I just need a bit more time!"

"Corporal we don't have time! We need to move now! They're closing in on us!"

"Captain! Sensors are picking up a gunship on its way," Sergeant Pierce reported as she was slowly making a tactical retreat backwards within the confines of her Atlas. She was pissed. Outside of Private Ramirez, Corporal Dunn, and Sgt. Foley, these four eyed freaks had wiped out Fireteam Wolfgang in its entirety! They had been fighting for almost an entire day with little sleep. She was exhausted, but she couldn't give in. Not when she was piloting the only TITAN mech probably still standing in the city. TITAN command had long been wiped out in a massive assault and backup was nowhere to be found.

"Captain! Take the VIP and go! I'll hold them off as long as I can," Pierce declared.

"Sergeant that'sâ€" "

"I'm well aware of the risks, ma'am!" she argued back. Claire growled in frustration, but nodded her consent.

"It was a privilege, Sergeant."

"Likewise," she replied simply.

"Ramirez, Sgt. Foley, fall back!" she ordered. The two nodded and ran into a half sprint, looking back and firing a few suppressing rounds every five meters or so as they made a tactical retreat.

Pierce piloted her Atlas so that it was in the middle of the street, a clear an open target. "All right you alien assholes!" the drell shouted, the irony not lost on her. Instead of controlled bursts like she was trained, the TDST held down the trigger inside the cockpit and emptied her entire magazine of 20x99mm rounds into the streets. Bodies tumbled and failed as cover was blown off and bodies exploded.

The pilot didn't stop there. Once her magazine was empty she threw the massive 500 kilogram heavy chain gun away, the sheer weigh crushing an already damaged vehicle with several windows and pieces of glass cracking. Pierce pressed the floor pedals forcing the Atlas into a sprint, each step making an audible crack in the concrete. One Batarian was grabbed and tossed forty feet in the air and then broke his legs on impact as he landed.

Despite the hundreds of slugs firing at the Atlas, Pierce kept on going not giving up, even as the insides of her TITAN was on fire and systems were failing left and right.

"Caution: You are outnumbered. Systems Failing."

"I know you piece of junk!" she roared firing shoulder missiles at the gunship that was headed her way. The missiles didn't even lock on and missed the targets completely. They crashed into a support beam of a construction crane brining it down on to the streets, crushing any unfortunate soul who happened to be in the wrong place. The

gunship fired line of sight, sensors flaring inside telling her to eject.

"All right screw this!" She punched out with explosive force before the gunship's missile destroyed the once mighty TITAN. She landed with a thud, using her boosters to slow her fall down. Rolling into cover behind a pillar, she checked the mag on her DMR: 15 rounds, two-thirds of a full clip. She fired off seven semi-automatic rounds and was rewarded with two kills for her efforts. Years of experienced taught her to trust instinct and she moved out the way as a knife embedded itself in the pillar. She tried to bring up her rifle, but it was swapped away by the clearly skilled CQC Batarian. Pierce engaged him, her body full of adrenaline. Aiming for center mass she tackled him to the ground in an effort to snatch the knife and put it between its four eyes. With several punches she managed to disorientate the bastard for few seconds. She went for the knife, an action that was responded too by kicking her to the side.

Pierce grunted in pain, coughing up blood and sniffing as blood was pouring out of her nose. Wasting no effort, the Batarian leapt toward the TDST operative, straggling her legs pinning her to the floor. She blocked his hands in a quick motion, preventing herself from being stabbed in the neck. In the process, she had cut her hands accidentally. She fought valiantly, but the knife inched closer and closer to her neck. On a good day, she might have been able to fight him off, but she was exhausted from the intense urban combat. The alien's grin was undeniable. He was enjoying the fact that his face would be the last she'd ever see.

'_I won't give you the satisfaction, you sick fucker!_' _She took one last peaceful breath, shut her eyes, and slowly allowed the knife to descend.

It wasn't meant to be. In one smooth motion, a hand grabbed the back of the Batarian's neck and pulled him off. A massive human in red armor and a skull faceplate held him in mid air. "I'm ready to die! How about you!?" Emile said plunging his own knife into his neck and slicing down. The blade cut through his ribcage with ridiculous ease. Poor bastard didn't feel a thing.

In different areas of the highway, NOBLE team decloaked and let loose. With a massive crack, Jorge was spinning up his chain gun mowing down the enemy as they hybrid rounds phased right through the kinetic barriers. They dropped like flies as legs and arms were blown off, even entire torsos. Carter laid down some suppressive fire with a DMR, for every two shots, he was rewarded with one kill. Nathan and Kat were sprinting through the formations and were taking the Batarians head on with a combination of CQC, direct assault rifle. Despite not really interacting too much, Kat and Nathan were in a sort of "dance", complementing each other perfectly and covering each other in transition to new tactics on the fly. It was the kind of coordination that no soldier in the Alliance could ever hope to match, unless they were trained as an OMEGA.

Caught off guard by the sudden appearance of the elite Spartan fireteam, the gunship pilot momentarily ignored Claire and her small TDST squad. Revving up the engines, the aerial vehicle did a 180-degree turn on its side and fired slugs as it did so. The bullets missed as NOBLE took cover. Aiming at a general area, he stabilized the ship in a hover to fire line of sight.

That was a fatal mistake.


Jun, around 3 kilometers away, was waiting for this exact moment. The SPARTAN-III squeezed the trigger of his sniper rifle. A shot rung out and penetrated the canopy hit the pilot square between the eyes and it lanced outward to the back engines. The 14.5x114 Hybrid round embedded itself in the concrete, creating a large crack about thirty inches wide. The gunship auto rotated and crashed into a store with a large explosion.

It was over almost as quickly as it began. Two platoons of Batarian soldiers all laid dead at the hands of NOBLE.

"Are you okay, ma'am," Emile asked awkwardly, not used to talking to "normies" as he liked to call Alliance soldiers that weren't augmented like he was. The SPARTAN-III helped the shocked Master Sergeant to her feet.

"I...yes...yes, I am. Thank you," she replied, still in amazement at what she had just witnessed. Five soldiers in a short period of time had utterly slaughtered a large number of invaders and they didn't even look as if they were trying! She glanced at them all as the rest of NOBLE came up to her. She subconsciously took a step back. They were human, no doubt, but they had to be at least a good foot and a half taller than she was! "Who exactly are you?"

"I'm Commander Carter, of NOBLE Team, Systems Alliance OMEGA division," he lied...sort of. After all, the only ones who knew they were actually _Spartans _were the UNSC and Separatists (obviously), Xavier, Ishigami, Hernandez, Dragovich, and Ashdown. Not even Fireteam ARCLIGHT knew who they really were, let alone the rest of the OMEGA regiments. As far as they knew, they were OMEGA just like they were, except they existed before them...which technically speaking, wasn't a lie.

"OMEGA?" she jerked her head in confusion. "I've never even heard of them." She stared at all of their chest plates. On their right breast was a distinct symbol in bright orange: . She resisted the urge to snort in amusement.

"Good," Kat told her. "You weren't ever supposed to...till now at least."

'_I wasn't supposed too? Are they part of some secret branch of the Office of Alliance Intelligence?' _

"We should check up on the others," Nathan suggested.

"Agreed," Carter nodded. In a single hand motion, NOBLE team moved out with deadly precision. Peirce was at a loss for words. Not even Wolfgang at their best moved with such purpose. Not wanting to be left behind she scooped up a Battle Rifle from the corpse of an Alliance Army operative. She checked the ammo: it was full. Satisfied, she did a light jog rushing towards Claire and what was left of her once elite Fireteam.

Meanwhile, Claire was helping Corporal Dunn with the Draxian, keeping his legs up. Even aliens could go into shock. Go figure.

"There. All done," Dunn told him, giving him a smile. He helped him to his feet.

"Can you walk?" Claire asked giving him a once over. She'd be lying if she said she wasn't concerned about his wounds reopening.

"Yes...yes, I can," he replied. "Thank you."

Claire nodded and glanced back to see Sergeant Pierce and six armored giants strolling towards the small group. She blinked twice, in shock. Pierce was alive!?

"Holy hell, Sergeant. I thought you were goner!" Ramirez whistled, dutif

The female drell simply smirked. "Gonna take more than a few four eyed freaks to take me down," she responded.

"I don't know who you guys are, but you saved our collective asses. I wasn't sure we were going to make it."

"We were doing our jobs ma'am. We couldn't leave you behind," Carter told them, but truthfully he was unsure. Had Jun told them their objective was in the opposite direction would he have made the call or simply just pressed on?

"I see. Thanks. Captain Claire Carter, TDST," she introduced herself. She motioned for the rest of Wolfgang to do the same.

"Private James Ramirez, TDST 10th Division, Alpha Company, Fireteam Wolfgang."

"Corporal Jason Dunn, same as Ramirez."

"Sergeant David Foley," Sgt. Foley replied simply.

"Master Sergeant, Vecila Pierce, CO of Fireteam Wolfgang...well...what's left of it anyhow," she dolefully added. Noble Six frowned, sympathizing with the drell.

Carter nodded. "Commander Carter, OMEGA division. This is my fireteam, NOBLE: Kat, Jun, Emile, Jorge, and Nathan." He pointed at each Spartan as he called out their names. He then observed at the Draxian, pointedly, who didn't seem surprised at all by their appearance.

"I'm Zora Alayk, RSTF (Royal Special Task Force) Intelligence Operative."

Noble One's eyes widened ever so slightly in surprise. A member of the Royal Guard? Here of all places? "You're part of the Royal Guard? The hell you doing out here? Shouldn't you be guarding the Kings?"

"Ordinarily, yes," he replied. "But we lost communications inside our underground bunker and I was sent along with a task force to find out why. To make a long story short, my unit was ambushed and we were wiped out...except for me, until these guysâ€"he pointed towards Wolfgangâ€"saved me. I've been with them ever since. We've been

trying to find out what's causing our COMS to stop functioning."

"We're already aware of why," Kat said as-a-matter-of factly.

"The Batarians have set up jamming rigs in strategic parts of the city, neutralizing our air support and communications. As long as they maintain those jammers, we're in for a long, bloody, and losing fight."

"We have to destroy those rigs," Zora cried out. "We have no way of contacting the Kings or Guards, negating any extraction option."

"That's a fine plan and all, but how the hell are we supposed to find the damn things? We got barely working tech as it is!" Ramirez growled out.

"The jamming rigs would have to be high enough to broadcast a strong signal, yet short enough where they won't stand out too much."

Zora's eyes widened as realization dawned on him. "The Stock Exchange. I've been there several times. It's a perfect location."

"We'll take care of it. You four need to get somewhere safe, regroup, andâ€"

"No," Zora interjected, catching Carter completely off guard. The only persons who had ever told him "no" were officers that outranked him.

"We're going with you," Claire declared, instinctively picking up on the reason Zora told the super soldier no, instantly. Judging from the rest of Fireteam Wolfgang's faces, they agreed.

"We can't do that. We...have special skills," Carter cryptically tried to allay. "You'd only slow us down."

"That may be," Zora admitted. "But you're going to need all the help you can get. That jammer is going to be heavily guarded. That, and who's going to convince the Kings that you're trustworthy, hmm?"

Jorge burrowed his eyebrows. "How'd you-?"

"I was well aware of your mission to extract us," he revealed. "Problem was, things went to hell, as you humans say and I didn't have the time to contact you. Add in the fact that these invaders blocked out our communications...well...yeah. Bad day for all of us."

Carter grunted. Unlike the Master Chief, he had never directly fought alongside regular human forces for an extended period of time, vastly preferring his augmented brothers and sisters. However, in the career of a Spartan, there was a first time for everything, this particular situation being one of them.

"Very well," he relented. In a split second, all of NOBLE team went

wide eyed, decades of instinct coming into play. "Get to the corners!" Without being told twice, Claire, Zora, Dunn, Ramirez and Foley each dived into the shadows. NOBLE team did the same activating active camouflage. Four Batarian fighter jets streaked over the overpass and broke off in four different directions looking for the enemy.

"Yeah...we really need to find those jammers."

Fireteam Wolfgang couldn't agree more.

* * *

><p>SSV Dawn of an Era

Slipspace, ETA to Zestiria, two minutes

In the launch bay of the stealth Autumn class cruiser, Dawn of an Era, several hundred OMEGA supersoldiers were prepping for imminent deployment, along with dozens of SPARTAN-IVs who happened to be stationed on ARCHON when Zestiria was invaded. Among these were Majestic and Crimson. However there was one OMEGA squad that distinguished themselves from their peers. They were easily the best soldiers in the Systems Alliance, bar Blue Team and the Ghosts.

They were known simply as Fireteam ARCLIGHT.

Julius-225 (Formerly Julius Halcyon), stepped on to the deck, his boots making a clank on the metallic floors. He was caramel skinned, showing clear mixed ancestry. His chocolate brown eyes, augmented with state-of-the-art technology took in his surroundings with extraordinary detail. Opening a door, he found his second-in-command, Sam-330 (Formerly Samuel Hong), sitting on the floor reading a book. In contrast to Julius' blue EXCALIBUR Powered Assault armor, Sam's was jet black.

"Sam, it's time. Two minutes," Julius told the Chinese born OMEGA supersoldier. Sam nodded and grabbed his Katana and attached it to his back, the magnetic clamps locking in place with an audible "click". He rose to his height of 6'11 and cracked his neck.

"Where's the rest of the team?" he asked, frigidly, locking eyes with ARCLIGHT's leader.

"Hangar," Julius replied simply as the two walked off together. There was always this silent tension and coldness between the two super soldiers. Julius suspected that it was because the Commander had chosen him as his personal protÃ©gÃ© and not Sam. He gave a shrug. That was Sam's problem, not his. As long as he obeyed his orders, he couldn't care less about his personal opinion.

The pair came through a pair of doors, finding the rest of ARCLIGHT near a stealth Pegasus dropship.

"Oi! Bout time you bloody showed up!" Anya-120 (Formerly known as Anya "Angel" Lockheart), sneered, her British accent thick and distinguished. Anya was 6'8 with hazel eyes and dirty blonde hair in a ponytail. She was a moderately attractive woman, even with the scar that ran from her right ear to her neck. In her hand was a heavily

modified Sniper rifle that would've made even Linda blush. She would know...she taught the woman. Her EXCALIBUR armor was cobalt blue.

"Anya, calm down," Mike-141 (formerly known as Michael Carter), tried to allay ARCLIGHT's recon and scout specialist. Mike was 7'1, with blue eyes and short black hair, and had blood red EXCALIBUR armor. He was the teams' explosive expert and heavy gunner. To pass the time by, he was playing chess with Alastor-203 (Formerly Alastor Hughes). Alastor shook his head and moved a knight on the board, keeping his mouth shut.

"Mike, he always does this. Locks himself in a room, sharpening his sword ignoring the rest of us!"

"This, coming from the OMEGA soldier who would rather be lazy and unmotivated during her downtime?" Lark-355 (Formerly known Larkspur Davidson) sarcastically comments as she stepped off the ramp of the Pegasus. Lark was the shortest of ARCLIGHT at only 6'6. She had black hair with red highlights and fittingly enough her armor matched both colors.

She opened her mouth to retort, but closed it promptly, not finding a good enough comeback.

"Huh, for once your mouth gets you in trouble, Anya," Julius smirked. Sam just gave her an amused smile, which only infuriated her. Bastard had won their little "disagreement" without saying a word!

"Once we kick these invaders ass, I'm so getting you back, Sam!"

Sam rolled his eyes. "Of course you will."

"All right, enough chit-chat," Julius commanded, changing the light-hearted banter to one of seriousness. All of them stood up and gave him their undivided attention. "You already know the basics, so I'll spare you the details. I'll give you the short and sweet version: The Kings are trapped in their palace. We're performing an extraction Op. General Dragovich has outright ordered us to take no prisoners. Every single Batarian we see is to be **immediately** killed upon sight."

"Understood."

"Are there any questions?"

"Just one," Anya spoke up. "What happens after we kick the invaders off the planet?"

Julius grinned. "Isn't it obvious? What do you think Director Xavier and Admiral Ishigami are planning once this is all over? They attacked our ally, unproved which means..."

Anya's eyes nearly bulged out of her sockets, before settling into a grin. "Bloody hell..."

"Yup. Once we kick these bastards off Zestiria...we're taking the fight directly to their homeworld."

* * *

><p>Okay, that's the end of that! How'd you like it? Probably my longest action sequence of any of my stories. I changed a few things here and there, but I'm satisfied with it.<p>

Anyone catch all my homages to CoD? :P

Anyhow, for those of you are no doubt going to ask, yes, these Batarians are professionals, not slavers. Therefore they are much more disciplined and skilled than the ones you fight in the games. Not quite like the Turians, but enough to give the Alliance a decent challenge.

Thanks to all who submitted OCs! Congratulations to all the users who submitted OCs who won and if yours wasn't chosen, don't take it personally please! It was a very difficult decision, believe me!

Next chapter! Blue team, ARCLIGHT and the Sangheili Ghosts join the fray to stop the invasion!

Codex:

****THOR: ****Retrofitted onto the Infinity in 2568, THOR is a powerful direct energy weapon, which acts like a SPARTAN laser, except in the void of space. No known ship has survived a direct hit.

****M41 HAILSTORM****: M41 Hailstorm NSGs are small, twin barrelled 155mm MACs that supplement Archer pods for close range fights. Where the main gun of the ship is unable to fire, such as close range broadside engagements, the M41 can be deployed from their recess positions to deliver heavy fire to the enemy warship.

8. Liberation

**Mass Effect: The New Journey**

_**Chapter Eight: **__Liberation _

So, you all will have another chance to submit OCs! Details at the end of the chapter! You're going to have a long time to do these, so I'll expect nothing but the best. Anything that even appears half-assed will be tossed out immediately.

Anyhow, enough of that, we have a Batarian invasion to thwart! And a surprise character and revelation!

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* * *

><p>System Unknown, Unknown Time

****Turian Facility, Codename "NOVA 6" ****

****November 2****nd****, 2167 ****

General Septimus Oraka sighed deeply in thought as his personal frigate, General's Gambit, continued to make random FTL jumps in various nebulas in the outskirts of the Terminus Systems. Not only was his ship state-of-the-art, equipped with the latest in stealth and speed, it proved to be durable and reliable as well, able to take a decent amount of punishment before its systems were overloaded.

Septimus then thought back over the past seven years since the Council had repealed the Treaty of Farixen. Military spending had grown exponentially, almost to the point of sheer lunacy, were the general being honest to himself. Rakhana had quickly established itself to become the largest shipyard in Citadel Space, second only to Taetrus, the Hierarchy's most important strategic military colony. At peak production, the shipyard could produce a dozen dreadnoughts in a month, all equipped with the latest technology, armor, sensors, etc. Through scuttlebutt and hearsay, he had heard rumors of the Asari Republics building a ship even larger than the Destiny Ascension, or at the very least an equal. Under general circumstances, that would've unsettled the Turian General, but the Asari's "secret weapon" was not his primary concern, not by a long shot. The Asari had their secrets and the Hierarchy sure as hell had there's.

"General, we're approaching the field, now," his pilot said over the intercom.

"Your pass code is needed."

Septimus nodded to himself and picked up a tablet, as he made his way toward the bridge. He entered the twelve-digit code unique to himself: the day he proposed to his mate in combination with the day he enlisted in the Turian military. Turning his face, his mandibles came together in a small smile, as he looked at her picture of them and their twins: one male, one female, the latter being older by few minutes. In one year, both of them would go through the Hierarchy's mandatory military service for a period of time. They were taught well, he knew they wouldn't disappoint him.

'But when they find out what we're doing...will they be disappointed in me?' _ He asked himself, doleful at the thought. He shook his conscience clear. His job was to protect the Council and the Hierarchy...at any cost, no matter how repugnant it may have been.

The doors to the bridge parted and his minimal crew gave him a curt nod and didn't go through any formalities, thankfully. He was amongst friends, not subordinates.

"Codes accepted."

The General's Gambit sailed through the vacuum of space of the unknown system and came across an asteroid belt. "NOVA-6, this is General's Gambit, crossing now." Passing through a "field" that shimmered, the secret facility that didn't officially exist came into view. NOVA-6 was a space station, roughly a tenth of the size of the Alliance's gargantuan military space station and capital, Arcturus.

It was in the shape of a Turian's talons with a large dome, roughly 3.5 kilometers in diameter in the center. At each of the "talons" was a set of cables, made from the finest steel the Hierarchy could synthesize, that went to several other domes that grew food, water, entertainment, etc.

The asteroid belt had several holographic emitters that concealed the station from plain sight, along with a plethora of other materials and tech that made it undetectable by normal scanning. The Turians hadn't shared this knowledge with the Salarians for obvious reasons.

In front of the Turian piloting the Gambit, a holographic blue "lane" appeared in his HUD, marking a predetermined path for the frigate to follow exactly to a tee. Several mass accelerator cannons tracked this movement, being automated by state-of-the-art virtual intelligences. If there were any deviation from the predetermined navigation lanes then they'd be blown out of the sky, metaphorically speaking. NOVA-6 had security protocols that would make even the STG consider it was "overkill".

Coming inside a hangar, they passed an atmospheric barrier, with several Turian soldiers guiding the frigate to dock. Allowing itself to hover, four magnetic locks on either side of the ship locked it firmly in place.

After being cleansed of foreign bacteria, Septimus stepped through the airlock and onto the deck of NOVA-6, where Turian guards from the First Task Group, an elite infantry unit, the equivalent of the System Alliance's Heavy Shock Trooper division, greeted him. Every single security officer on NOVA-6 was hand picked by the General himself.

"General Oraka, sir," the lead FTG commander greeted. His armor was pitch black like the rest of his men, but on either shoulder were silver talons of a talcus, an avian species native to Palaven, signifying his rank of Colonel.

"Colonel Ragnoros," Septimus returned his greeting. Valos Ragnoros was...an enigma to say the least. Considering his past, most commanders would've dismissed him outright, Septimus included, had he not met the man personally. He definitely had potential; it just needed to be nurtured. Who knew cutting him off from galactic civilization would allow him to do just that?

"I have to admit, sir," Ragnoros began as he escorted the general, along with three other FTG soldiers, down the halls of the ultra-top secret facility, "I was not expecting you for another month. What brings you here?"

"We need to speed up our timetable," Septimus told him gravely with a sigh. "We need them...soon!"

Ragnoros would be lying if he said he wasn't a bit taken back by how blunt and to the point his commanding officer was. "Sir, surely you realize how delicate a process this is, no?"

Septimus gave the colonel a fierce glare. "I'm well aware of that, Colonel," he practically spat, not appreciating his intelligence being insulted. The colonel swallowed hard under his intense

gaze.

"My apologies, sir...but why would we need them now?"

"The Batarians."

Ragnoros halted all movement in total shock. "The...The Batarians?! Sir, the First Task Group itself could destroy the Hegemony, why would we need the HUN?"

"That's not what I mean," the General interrupted. "I've learned from some of my contacts that the Batarians have attacked another species...unknown to the Council."

Every single Turian's eyes widened as dinner plates. Had those idiotic slavers started a war with a species as potentially dangerous as the Rachni?!

"Spirits!"

"Exactly. I'd be willing to bet every credit to my name, the species they attacked was the same species that uplifted that reptilian race the STG had monitored." The silence among the group of elite soldiers was palpable.

"We're here, sir," an FTG member in front of them spoke. Two guards stood weapons at port arms at a massive gate made of the same material that protected the Council's inner sanctum. After a biometric scan confirming he was who he said he was, the massive doors split apart.

"Spirits," General Oraka muttered to himself, in awe. No matter how many times he visited, this laboratory would never cease to astound him. They were in a lab in the shape of a dome that stretched 150 meters to the top of the ceiling. On the edges of the walls were hundreds, if not thousands of capsules. Dozens of the Hierarchy's best and brightest engineers, technicians, and doctors were checking the capsules running tests, checking vitals of the occupants inside, along with a plethora of other monitoring techniques. They used various mechanical platforms that were built into the facility to check capsules at heights they could not reach by normal means.

"Ah! General Oraka! Good to see you my old friend," a Turian scientist exclaimed as Septimus and Ragnoros came upon a main platform. There were six capsules bigger than the rest in this part of the laboratory.

"Dr. Ruyio," he greeted cordially, not returning his childhood friend's enthusiasm. Septimus knew that his compatriot's upbeat attitude was the only way the Turian could continue as head of this project without feeling immense amount of remorse and regret.

Dr. Ruyio frowned, recognizing Septimus' grave attitude from a cycle away. "Is something wrong, Septimus?" he inquired, using his personal name to show his genuine concern.

Clenching his mandibles, the General nodded. "Yes...I'm afraid we have a delicate situation on our hand."

"You mean the Batarians, I presume?"

General Oraka wasn't surprised in the slightest bit that Dr. Ruyio knew that clandestine bit of intelligence. "Indeed," he confirmed. "What's their status?"

The scientist smiled whimsically, before replying, "They're coming along nicely, though if my hunch is correct, you want to deploy them soon, no?" General Oraka said nothing in response, which Dr. Ruyio took as a confirmation. He led the General to one capsule in the research lab that was twice as large as the others on the walls. The liquid inside was a dark violet color, concealing what was inside. Tapping on a data pad, the liquids inside became as clear as water.

Inside the tank...was a Turian. The alien was enormous, a good six feet and ten inches by General Oraka's rough estimate. Its eyes were completely open, yet it was clear that the Turian was unconscious. The frame of the body was completely lean and muscular, cybernetic parts in various parts of its body, including the left eye and arm. All in all, the Turian looked like it could rip a Krogan to pieces with ease with its bare hands, which, considering the expectations of the program was the bare minimum of feats the Hierarchy expected.

"Spirits..." Colonel Ragnoros muttered, as he shifted uncomfortably, slightly cringing in doing so. Even knowing his alien "cousin" was unconscious didn't put him at ease.

"Turian HUNTERS," Dr. Ruyio whistled. "Greatest soldiers in the Galaxy you're looking at here." Septimus only grunted in response.

The general's curiosity got the better of him. "What are you doing to them, now?" Intriguingly, there was a thick "cable" that connected to the base of the back of the turian's skull which traveled outward of the capsule into the bottom of the laboratory. If Septimus had to guess, it looked awfully similar to the server rooms in the Citadel.

The doctor gave a smirk. "Oh, he's just fighting some Asari Commandos," he replied nonchalantly.

"I...what?!" he blinked in confusion.

"We've equipped every stasis pod to a unified virtual reality simulation or UVRU for short. We can simulate a number of scenarios where they participate in the Hierarchy's most infamous campaigns, including the Krogan Rebellions. So, in addition to their normal training here in the real world, even resting, the battles never end," he explained. "As of now, they're simulating a scenario of a purely hypothetical Turian invasion of Thessia's various Republics."

" Really, now? How well are they doing?"

"Put it this way: If we had the element of surprise and we were extremely well organized and coordinated, our entire HUNTER division could bring Thessia to its knees...by themselves." Of course what he didn't tell the General is that in the process outside of **maybe** two or three squadrons, tops, the entirety of

the HUNTERS would be wiped out, but that wasn't a detail that was worth bringing up.

"I see...this simulation would do wonders for our forces," General Oraka commented impressed, looking passively at the HUNTER with piqued interest.

"Unfortunately, this technology is extremely new and so far only HUNTERS can handle the simulation's psychological effects. Unless we start dedicating resources to adapt it to normal Turian use, you won't see it trickle down to out the FTG units until _maybe_ a half-century at best. That's me being optimistic. Care to wait?" he inquired rhetorically.

Septimus growled in frustration and anger. They didn't HAVE a half-century. Not when the Citadel was on the brink of a potentially violent first contact. He was almost positive that the species those idiotic Batarians attacked were going to want retribution. They weren't going to stand a chance.

"Are there any HUNTERS who can deploy, now?"

Dr. Ruyio gave it some thought. "Well, it's a definite possibility, but I'll need about 15 cycles or so. Why?"

"Recon mission," he stated simply.

"To where?"

General Oraka stared solemnly at the HUNTERS inside the capsule. Taken away at the age of eight years to be sent on missions deemed suicidal, even for Spectre agents. Had the Hierarchy not marked them for genetic potential, what kind of life would these killing machines have had? A respected Spectre agent? A future Primarch that would lead the Turians to a new golden age? A C-Sec officer, perhaps? With a sigh, he glanced down, curiously. There was a nameplate on the tanks, just like all others:

SAREN, H-711

Renegade Squadron

_Role: Squadron Leader _

GARRUS, H-850

_Renegade Squadron

>Role: Long Range Marksman

_NIHLUS, H-401 _

Renegade Squadron

Role: Various, XO of Renegade

"Khar'shan," Oraka replied. "If these aliens retaliate, and I'd be willing to bet my entire life savings on that they will, I want to see how our HUNTERS stack up...quietly of course." He turned to him, his posture in parade rest. "We've trained them to be capable of such clandestine operations, no?"

"Indeed. They are. However...you are aware of the risks involved even with their impeccable skill, no?"

"I'm well aware, but considering we're going to have go public eventually...I don't really think it matters much. The Spirits damn us, either way. Anyhow, Renegade is a standard five troop strong Squadron, no?"

"Yes, they are," Ragnoros butted in. "But, they are missing two members...we'll need to find replacements. Saren is known to push his team hard during training. So far...only Garrus and Nihlus have managed to keep up with him."

"I don't want excuses, Colonel, Doctor. Just results. Find those replacements if you must and I want them covert operations on Khar'shan on the double."

"I see. Very well. I'll make the arrangements and see what I can do. If you'll excuse me." The Turian scientist excused himself from the room, accompanied by two FTG soldiers.

General Oraka took one final look at Saren, who's face nearly gave the impression of purgatory: neither alive nor dead. He frowned, as if pleading with the Spirits to absolve him of his sins.

'_May our children forgive us for what we've done...for we had no choice.'_

* * *

><p>Vixa System_

November 2**nd ****2167 **

"Target locked on!"

"Fire! Full broadside fire!"

The Strident-class frigate, the SSV Iwo Jima, locked on target and it launched several Jericho missiles into the void, from their pods. The missiles were being cut down even as they were separating into smaller missiles by GARDIAN defense lasers. The Batarians had wizened up, using their superior numbers to their advantage. They were staying out of range and using the mass effect drives for increased maneuverability. Their ships may have been several orders of magnitude technologically inferior to the Alliance in almost every way offensively, that didn't mean there weren't advantages they couldn't take advantage of to gain the upper hand, if only temporarily.

The UNSC Infinity shook violently as more Mass Accelerator rounds hit the portside of the gargantuan flagship. Admiral Lasky was nearly knocked off his feet.

"Christ, Roland, when the hell are our shields coming back?!" he practically roared.

"Admiral, Infinity is literally taking on hundreds of ships by itself, damn it! Were we any other ship, we'd be free floating space

debris by now! Our Titanium-A3 hull is holding, but I'm not sure for how long!"

"Damn it, Roland, we need anotherâ€"Yes, Lieutenant, I'm well aware of that! Divert Katanas to assist our Sabres from their fighters. Strident-3, assist Katana Squadron Warhawk!" he ordered before turning back to the AI. "Roland, I need a firing solution on that cruiser!" Lasky was unaware that the so-called "cruiser" was actually a dreadnought by Citadel classifications.

"I got a target, Alpha, Zulu, Tango, Foxtrot! Bearing 18-by-183! MACs at 100 percent charge!"

"Fire!"

The Four Series-8 MAC guns on Infinity's bow, fired in rapid succession, three aimed at a cruiser and the fourth a dreadnought, sending four 1500-ton ultra dense depleted uranium rounds racing towards them at 60,000 meters per second. The opposing ships' shields didn't stand a ghost of a chance. The dreadnought wasn't just destroyed when the salvo smashed against its hull; it was thoroughly annihilated by the immensely powerful kinetic weapon. It was the very definition of overkill.

"Targets destroyed."

"Admiral! They're repositioning themselves!"

"Show me!" he ordered as he stared at several holograms. By his count there were three Batarian dreadnoughts left, staying as far from Infinity as they could, while staying in range of their main guns.

"So, it's like that huh?" Lasky mused to himself. He looked on his data pad. Infinity's shielding still hadn't come back online and likely wouldn't until they were given some breathing room. There was no way they could retreat though. Not when they were the only ships standing between the Batarians and Zestiria's annihilation.

Before he could give an order, a flotilla of cruisers and fighters suddenly exploded in violent flash of light, nearly blinding some Katana and Sabre pilots had the filters on both their canopies and the glass on their HUDs tinted instantaneously. Altaz, a small planet the size of Pluto and eighth from Vixa's star, had its atmosphere set ablaze that covered a good chunk of the planetoid, in fallout.

"_Holy shit!_"_

"_What the hell was that?!_"_

"_Wasn't me, bro!" _

"_Was that a nuke? Jesus!" _

"_That was way too close!"_

That was just many of the various transmissions from the pilots from Infinity's complement of fighters who were fighting valiantly engaging Batarian fighters and frigates.

"Roland! What the hell was that?!"

The Artificial Intelligence gave him a sly grin. "Nuke, sir. Hyperion-II class. Batarians just got a 150-megaton surprise."

"I didn't order any..."

Lasky trailed off he watched his holographic map and smiled. Hundreds of slipspace portals opened up. The Systems Alliance arrived en-mass with every class of ship in the Alliance's possession: Paris-class frigates, Strident-class heavy-frigates, Brutus class heavy destroyers, dozens of Halcyon-class cruisers, Marathon-class cruisers, Valiant-class Ultra-heavy Cruisers, and carriers of all classes. And the numbers kept growing. When one slipspace portal closed, another opened.

In the middle of the enormous fleet, three more slipspace ruptures tore through the fabric of space and three ships exited: one CAS-class Assault carrier, one Covenant supercruiser, and the SSV _Atlas_.

"_Fifth Fleet reporting in!"_

"_875__th__ Flotilla Reporting in!"_

"_13__th__ Assault Fleet Reporting in!"_

"_4__th__ Flotilla Reporting in!"_

"_8__th__ Expeditionary Forces Reporting in!" _

"_Battle group Concord Reporting in!_

"_Battle group Lexington Reporting in!" _

One-by-one, each fleet, flotilla, battle group, and Task force naval unit reported in over FLEETCOM. It was like music to Admiral Lasky's ears. By his estimate, the brass had sent him reinforcements that numbered close to over _1500_ ships. The enemy was outnumbered _**and*_ outgunned.

"Admiral! We're being hailed!"

"Patch it through!"

On the holotable, to Admiral Lasky's surprise was the Director of Alliance Affairs himself, Miles Andre Xavier.

"Director?"

Xavier smirked. "You sound surprised," he mused.

"I am. I didn't expect you to lead this fleet personally."

The de-facto leader of humanity narrowed his eyes in barely restrained fury. "I worked hard to secure our Alliance with the Kings and I'll be _damned_ if I let some four-eyed bastards rob what I and so many others helped build almost eight years ago. Admiral, this is _personal_." Judging from his tone of voice, Lasky knew the man was

absolutely dead serious. Xavier may have been a humble man, but the System's Alliance's coalition with the Pact was his legacy and said legacy was being burnt to the ground, planetside...literally!

"I see. Glad to have your help. I don't think even Infinity could've lasted much longer without serious damage."

"Then take a rest. Jump towards another part of the system and recharge. We'll take it from here."

Lasky nodded and cut the connection. "You heard the man, Roland. Get us the hell out of here!"

"Aye, Admiral!" Roland acknowledged before piloting Infinity ten kilometers before the massive six-kilometer vessel vanished into the eleven-dimensions of slipspace.

Without even being told, thousands of Alliance dropships and fighters with hundreds of thousands of Marines, Vehicles, Orbital Assault Troopers, N7 and TDST, were heading towards Zestiria en masse, that looked like a swarm of deadly insects there numbers so numerous.

The liberation had begun.

* * *

><p>Kastella, Financial District, 30 minutes prior

A sextet of thuds, six SOEIV drop pods crashed on top of a roof of one Kastella's numerous skyscrapers. When the frontal hatches exploded outward, six armored figures stepped out, each with a weapon of their choice.

Due to their intense training, state-of-the-art augmentations, and superior technology, Fireteam ARCLIGHT took in their surroundings in seconds. Glancing up, the Dawn of an Era had made an in-atmosphere slipspace jump, likely to deploy Red Team, the Sangheili Ghosts and a good dozen OMEGA fireteams, to the southern continent.

ARCLIGHT collectively grimaced. Kastella was, by far, the largest city in Alliance and Pact space, being nearly two times the size of the Neo-Tokyo, New York City, and London...combined. Just three days ago, nearly 350 million Zestirian and Alliance citizens called the city home and now it was merely a shadow of its former self. Its once skyscrapers that stood five kilometers tall were simply gone. The entire city was up in flames with the cacophony of war being the only sound heard for tens of dozens of kilometers. It was a sobering sight to say the least.

Julius raised his MA6A Assault Rifle, scanning potential targets. He found none. He turned back to his team and did a slow nod. Anya was about to sprint off to scout ahead before she was stopped.

"Wait!" Lark called out, stopping ARCLIGHT's scout. The OMEGA supersoldier turned toward her, annoyed.

"What is it?"

"I'm getting a lot of static interference. Our COMs are being

jammed."

"Jamming rigs, perhaps?" Mike asked.

"More than likely," Lark confirmed.

Julius thought was in thought for the moment before making a decision. "All right, team, new plan: we're going to destroy those jamming rigs, wherever they might be. Rescuing the Kings is going to be extremely difficult otherwise."

Sam nodded his head. "Agreed." He checked his mission clock. "Alliance is gonna be here in half-an-hour. We need to move fast." An entire liberation force in numbers that approached the millions dropping in to save their Zestirian allies with no communications? That was the very definition of a disaster in the making.

"We don't know where to bloody look!" Mike pointed out. "This place is goddamn huge!" Mike had seen pictures of Kastella while on ARCHON and he knew it was enormous, but this was ridiculous!

"If I were the Batarians, which thankfully I'm not, the rigs would have to be high enough to broadcast a strong signal, yet hidden out of sight," Lark said.

"So...you mean like right over there?" Alastor grinned, as he had separated from the team to observe. "Anya, set up a camera feed and zoom in, coordinates 35-14-18."

Giving a slight shrug, the female OMEGA super soldier aimed her sniper rifle at the coordinates Alastor had pointed out. In the upper right corner of the Heads-Up-Display of the EXCALIBUR Powered-Assault Armor, they could see what she could. It was the Kastella Stock Exchange, relatively intact, but with one exception: a large alien tower on top that had none of the sophistication and architectural designs of either the Alliance or Pact. If ARCLIGHT had to give the Batarians some credit, they sure took the idea of function over form to heart.

"Well, I'll be damned," Mike whistled, impressed by Alastor's acute observation skills. Guy was a bloody Sherlock Holmes and didn't even realize.

"Good work. We've already wasted enough time, lets move out ARCLIGHT!" Julius ordered and the elite OMEGA team leapt off the building they had dropped on and went into staggered formations. They had Batarians to kill.

* * *

><p>Kastella, Central Financial District

November 2**nd****, 2167 **

Carter ducked behind cover of a car, eagerly waiting for his shields to recharge. Hundreds of mass accelerated bullets were whizzing above him, the Batarians eagerly doing all they can to put as many rounds downrange as they could. Silently, he was cursing the fact that NOBLE had overused MJOLNIR XII's Active Camouflage, forcing the team plus TDST to do things the old fashioned way.

"Captain! You got a clear path?" he shouted near him to see Claire laying suppressive fire with her EBR. She was rewarded with two kills, as the Hybrid rounds phased through their kinetic barriers like nothing.

"I need some cover!" she shouted back.

"Coming right up!" Emile shouted almost gleefully as he practically ran into a sprint, blew a Batarian soldier's head off with the AA-48, spun into cover, and forced their attention on the SPARTAN-III. Kat and Jun kept firing in their general direction to also provide some cover.

"Deploying cover!" Corporal Ramirez shouted as he threw a grenade that expanded outwards into a shield made out of hard light.

"Nate! Captain! Zora! Go, go, go! We'll hold them here! Get to the Exchange!"

Claire, Zora, Noble-Six took off in a sprint, running through the barrage of fire, protected by the combined efforts of NOBLE and Wolfgang. Despite being non-augmented, Zora was able to keep up with the Spartan and Titan Drop Shock Trooper almost effortlessly.

"Go right, go right, move!" Six ordered as the three practically dived into a building, dodging a rocket fired from a Batarian APC that appeared from the corner of the street. The shockwave from the blast knocked the three soldiers off their feet and they landed with a thud. The trio felt rubble crumble from behind them and with a lack of a light source, the room darkened.

"Great, we're trapped," Claire dryly remarked as she picked herself up from the ground. "Guess we're on our own now."

"Indeed," Nathan agreed, before quickly scanning the room with his MA6A rifle for any targets. He found none. Nothing showed up on his motion detector either. "You two have night-vision?"

Claire took a moment to press a button on the side of her helmet. There was a few seconds of glitch-like shimmers, but eventually, she saw a green outlook of the building, indicating it was still functional. "Green here, sir."

Zora took out a pair of goggles that were oddly similar to swimwear and simply put them over his eyes and strapped them tight. Odd looks were thrown his way. "What? We Zestirians are old fashioned."

"Riiight," Claire shook her head.

With that being said, the trio raised their weapons and moved out, as quickly and quietly as they possibly could. Turning the corner, they came into a decent sized lobby that was formerly used to greet guests. Now it was a gruesome scene. There were corpses of executed civilians, mainly human and Draxian. Blood was spattered all over the walls along with hundreds of bullet holes and plasma burn marks. In an elevator, a drell marine operative's corpse was sitting up right with his feet hanging out halfway inside and out. The doors kept closing and opening, as the door sensors failed to recognize the

clearly dead soldier who bravely fought off the invaders. Behind him...were two human children and a trio of Caelean hatchlings that were no more than four or five standard years old, tops. All five had bullet holes in their foreheads.

"Jesus fucking Christ," Claire cursed, nearly throwing up at the sight. Even Nathan had to cringe, as flashbacks from the Human-Covenant War came back to him, briefly. While it was true the Sangheili had done wonders making up their mistakes and he respected the Arbiter and the Ghosts, he doubted he would ever completely let go of the atrocities on the Outer Colonies. That was something that could never truly be whitewashed away.

Zora was fuming and rightly so and gripped the Direct Marksman Rifle he had acquired from a dead TDST operative. "I'm going to say this one time: If the Alliance even tries to denies my people our vengeance, you can kiss **any** chance of the U.R.S.C forming goodbye and our alliance henceforth terminated. They will pay for this. Their colonies, their outposts, their trade routes, their goddamn homeworld, all of it will burn to the ground."

"I know what you mean. I'll be first to drop on these bastards homeworld."

"Let's continue," Nathan ordered. He agreed wholeheartedly. Once the Alliance brass and Lasky saw just what these slavers had done...the gloves were going to come off. The public would demand swift retribution and the Systems Alliance and Pact would respond in kind tenfold. He almost felt sorry for the poor bastards. Almost.

Exciting the lobby they moved into a walkway that connected to a bridge that had tinted windows that covered the entire thing, some of which were broken. The bridge connected to another building on the tenth floor...the stock exchange. So far, it was oddly quiet as the trio moved forward, carefully making their way across. Zora covered their six, aiming backwards in case they were followed, before turning back around and trailing Noble Six.

"It's Nathan, right?" Claire asked suddenly.

Six nodded, silently wondering what he wanted.

"Your team...what exactly are you? You aren't normal soldiers, I know that for a fact."

Zora kept quiet. He knew exactly what Nathan was, but pretended to be naïve and interested.

Nate didn't miss a beat. "We're genetically enhanced super soldiers, with highly specialized training and augmentations to make us faster, stronger, and more durable than any human could ever hope to be."

Claire blinked. "Wow. That sounds...classified."

"It is."

"And you're just telling us just like that?"

"By the end of this invasion the Alliance is going to have no choice but to come out with it. There's no conceivable way they could keep it secret any longer or any logical reason to even if there was a way."

"I suppose so..."

"I do hope Farix is safe, though," Zora offhandedly muttered, but Nathan still heard him.

"Farix? You mean that mountain that holds that facility the Pact keeps tight lipped? What exactly are you hiding there?"

The Draxian gave a tired sigh. "I wish I could say, but the orders from the Kings are absolute. But, believe me, Nathan, if the Batarians get their hands on the project in Farix then, to borrow the human phrase, shit is going to get **real**...very quickly." He then added in thought, '_You, of all people, probably should be one of the **first** to know what's down there...Spartan.' _

Pushing through a pair of doors, they came inside the stock exchange's trading floor. It was absolutely enormous. The Exchange in New York City on Earth was nearly ten times smaller!

"Contact! Left side!"

Zora dived into cover along with Claire each parallel with each other. It seemed as if there were hundreds of Batarian soldiers inside the exchange all firing blindly at the trio. Claire could see the exit to the roof plain as day, but it was on the other side of the room.

"Damn, for once could your species make things smaller?!"

"We like things big!" Zora replied back, firing off a few rounds of his DMR. The plasma coated round burned through glass computer monitors like butter and the shattered pieces burned some of the invaders skin, causing discomfort. Nathan took advantage of this and mowed them down. With a single 64 round clip, Noble Six had dropped sixteen Batarian troops like flies.

"Move up!" he ordered as he expertly reloaded in a span of two seconds, chambering a round.

Claire and Zora moved up as ordered, hopping over a set of tables and laying down fire as best as they could. They were at a severe disadvantage in a plethora of ways. For one, Zora had no energy shielding whatsoever and he was nowhere even close to as trained in direct action as Claire was, let alone Six. Second, Claire's TDST training was useless, because it emphasized constant movement, which was near impossible here with so many invaders. She could take some hits, but not much. Six was the only reason they weren't dead right now.

A blue canister dropped near Zora that glowed a bluish tint. The Draxian didn't notice, but Claire did. "Oh, Fuck! Zora, move, move, move!" She tackled her alien comrade out of the way, but not before the grenade detonated. The TDST captain was thrown forward violently, crashing through glass monitors, sliding across desks, before finally landing in a thud. Her helmet retracted inside the suit.

She was going through convulsions as the EMP grenade did its job competently. Bastards were commandeering their own weapons for themselves. She tried to move, but to no avail. The electronics inside her suit were fried completely. Fuck. Fuck!

"Captain! Captain!"

Blood filled her mouth. They couldn't get to her in time. Not if they wanted to complete the mission. Second-by-second the sounds of war were turned out as the TDST trooper's vision blurred in and out. Several Batarian troopers were making their way toward her, but she looked on without fear.

"Well...looks like I won't be able to make that drop after all, Zora." she mused to herself, coughing. She resigned herself to her fate as the invaders raised their rifles intent on ending her life.

Several shots had rung out. They all dropped to the floor instantly. Time seemed to slow down as a hulking giant in blood red armor stepped in front of her and dragged her to cover. "You never could stay out of trouble could you?"

Claire's eyes widened, in shock. She knew that voice anywhere. "Mi-Mike?!" she stuttered, in total disbelief.

As if to hammer it home, with a mental command, Mike retracted his helmet inside his EXCALIBUR armor. He smiled at his older sister. "In the flesh," he grinned.

"You...your mission...you're a-?"

"Shh...don't talk. I'll explain what I can, later," he told his sister soothingly. "We're going to get you out of here. Just hang tight okay?" He gave her some medigel. "Here, this should stop the bleeding." Claire took the medical treatment gracefully.

He kissed her forehead. "Little bro has to go kick some ass. So don't die on me, 'kay?"

Claire smiled weakly. "...'kay."

Mike brought his helmet back and he was prepared for battle again. In the time he had saved his sister's life, ARCLIGHT had already shown up to assist Nathan and Zora. With deadly precision, Anya had sniped two Batarian soldiers so quickly, they both fell to the ground simultaneously.

As impressive as the feat was, Sam, by far was the most brutal of the Elite OMEGA fireteam. Forgoing his MA6, he drew his katana and with a press of a button it was encoded with plasma. He sliced through a Batarian at the waist, cutting him completely in half. He kicked his upper torso away as if the invader were trash on the street. Using EXCALIBUR's built in jetpack boosters, he jetted backwards over a table and used the Magnum attached to his hip to put a bullet between the eyes of a Batarian soldier and then rolling into cover.

Sam had heard a war cry behind him, nearly catching him off guard. A Batarian soldier armed with long knives sharp enough to cut through

most material with ease charged the Chinese OMEGA soldier with the intent to engage in CQC. He didn't make it far. Julius had already cut him down with a burst of the MA6B's 10.2x56 Hybrid round.

"I could've taken him," Sam snorted, good-naturedly.

"I know, I just need to piss you off," Julius grinned, before the two went back-to-back at a moments notice to stop a pair of biotics preparing dual warps.

"Screw you, Julius," Sam replied smirking.

"Sam! Cover the Draxian! Lark and Alastor, go with him! Destroy that jammer!"

His orders acknowledged, Julius made his way back to Noble Six, laying down some suppressive fire as he did so.

"It's been awhile, Julius."

"Yes, sir it has. Glad to see us saving your ass this time around."

"Indeed. How many are left?"

"I'd say about three hundred or so," Julius shrugged.

"We've been through worse."

"Definitely," ARCLIGHT's leader agreed, he then smirked. "Bet I can get more kills than you."

"You know Commander-117 would frown upon this..." he noted. He then shrugged. "Eh, screw it."

Meanwhile, Sam was providing cover with the magnum as he, Lark, and Alastor protected Zora. "Let's go!" He brought his Katana down on the back of a Batarian's cranium, splitting his skull open as blood and grey matter spewed everywhere. Sam boosted to cover. The others managed to make it to the door.

"Ugh! It's locked!" Zora cried out in frustration.

"Step aside please," Alastor asked politely, his Russian accent thick. His right arm glowed blue, the tall tale signs of a biotic charge. With a brute force, he charged the door and punched right through. The steel doors were blasted backwards a good fifteen meters before skidding to a stop.

Lark raised her silenced SMG and dropped six Batarian soldiers waiting for them with a single magazine. She crossed the threshold and checked both sides after reloading. They were in the clear.

Zora blinked heavily. "...Holy shit."

"I'd suggest we move quickly. The Alliance will arrive in less than three minutes," Alastor relayed to him calmly.

"...Right."

The three came across some stairs and moved upwards, carefully checking their corners. Zora grunted a bit, insecurity starting to eat at him. These two were practically baby sitting him if he were a being honest with himself. A violent shake of the building nearly dropped him to the floor. He was exhausted, but he forced himself to press on in spite of his body wanting to rest.

"Maintain timeline, we need to hit the exchange."

Lark stopped at a door. "I hear multiple voices. Jammer's probably on the other side." She turned to Alastor. "Al, you got a flashbang?" The OMEGA soldier nodded.

"Breaching...three...two...one...mark!"

With a biotic charge, Alastor destroyed the door and tossed a flashbang, blinding the invaders. Disorientated, it was no surprise that Zora and Lark were able to smoke every last one of them.

"Jammers up ahead."

Upon going up a flight of stairs outside, the trio came across the Batarian jamming rigs. Aesthetically, they were even uglier up close. It was as if the Batarians had thrown every piece of communications tech they had and just bunched it all together and hoped for the best. Still, though, ugly as they were, the bloody things were preventing outside communication and for that reason they needed to go. Zora had finished setting the charges.

"Burn it."

With arguably the most satisfying button press of his life, the charges detonated. The jammer was set ablaze, metal was melted, and structural integrity was lost as the haphazardly thrown together device collapsed in on itself and fell five stories to the ground, shattering to hundreds of pieces.

Dozens of radio chatter came in as the communications came back.

"_...This is...Juliet Two-Four needing immediate assistance at..._"

"_...Badger-Zero-One, left side!_"

"_Holy hell COMs are back!_" _

"Commander, do you read me? Mission accomplished, sir," Lark spoke over the radio.

"_I read you loud and clear. Good work you three. Back up has already arrived. Rest easy for a while. You've earned it."_"

Zora looked up towards the sky and his eyes widened slightly. He had never seen so many drop pods in his life! Along with that there dozens of Broadwords and Pegasus dropships, no doubt filled with Marines, N7, and Orbital Assault Troopers.

He sat down on his buttocks, laid his DMR to the side, and leaned against an HVAC unit and closed his eyes, purely thankful. Even if this were only going to be for a few minutes at best, he'd rest and sleep, knowing that his homeworld was saved.

It was the best few minutes of sleep he ever had in his life.

* * *

><p>Office of Alliance Intelligence Vessel, SSV
**Start of Darkness **

November 2**nd****, 2167 **

System Unknown

"Commander, Admiral Ishigami is on the line for you," a drell OAI operative spoke as he entered the inner sanctum and private quarters of possibly the most classified vessel in the Office of Alliance Intelligence. The Darkness was state-of-the-art, using stealth technology that rivaled even Ishigami's flagship, the Amaterasu. Most of the crew officially didn't even exist, which, considering the operations they conducted, was absolutely paramount. If their current operation was ever leaked, the very foundation of the Systems Alliance could be torn apart.

"Very well," he replied standing up. "Leave," he commanded. The drell saluted and left as ordered. The door locked tight.

"EDI...seal this room tight."

His faithful Artificial Intelligence complied and in five microseconds, the doors were locked and no sound could come out either. The room darkened to near total loss of luminosity and the hard light emitters projected an image of Admiral Sayuri Ishigami.

"Admiral Ishigami," he saluted, half-heartedly with an undercurrent of displeasure.

His gesture was greeted with the same enthusiasm. "Commander Harper, it's been awhile since we last talked."

"It has," Harper acknowledged, as his blue eyes stared back at the flag officer. He brought out a cigarette, lit it, and took a deep puff. "The operation was a success...the Batarrians took our bait."

"I'm well aware," Ishigami nodded. "Xavier is on his way to liberate Zestiria as we speak."

Harper snorted. "Idealistic fool..."

Ishigami gave him a withering glare. "Watch your tongue, Harper. Keep such opinions to yourself, am I clear?"

Harper breathed out a few smokes. "Crystal," he replied dryly. It was clear that the women had a soft spot for the Director and unfortunately, try as he might; he had never found an opportunity to take advantage of it. He had to give the woman some credit, even if

he wasn't personally fond of her. She had her weaknesses out in the open and was still untouchable.

"I'm going to need you to stay out of sight even longer now. My teams are already preparing the necessary paperwork to cover your trails back here."

"Understood."

"Any questions?"

Harper paused and thought about it for a few moments. "When will you tell Xavier of the existence of this...Citadel?"

Her hologram pinched her nose. "When the time is right...not now. He'll know when he need to. Likely after we destroy every piece of the Hegemony."

"A dangerous game you're playing, Admiral. Should he find out what we've done, we're honestly dead sailors walking." Of course, privately, Harper already had contingency plans in place in the off chance things went to hell. Not that the Admiral needed to know that.

Ishigami gave him a cruel smirk and walked up to him. "Oh, yes, Jack. A dangerous game that you've played a hand in as well. And by the way, don't get any funny ideas. I know you're not fond of Xavier and you'd likely want him gone by any means necessary. You may be damn good at what you do, but I warn you now...you even think of stepping out of line without my permission, I'm going to make you regret it."

She turned around and smiled sadistically. Her hologram vanished, but not before saying seventeen words that sent chills down Harper's spine.

"After all...I'd hate to have to waste precious N7 agents on something as **trivial** as your execution."

* * *

><p>Looks like OAI are up to some shady stuff! Want to find out why? Keep on reading!<p>

It's that time again! Another round of OC submissions! This time however, there are going to be a good many you can choose from, one that might interest all types of parties. You can choose to submit an OC for each category or just one category, or anything in between, it's up to you. Just make sure if you're going to try to submit one, put forth your best effort!

****OC Submission Categories**:**

1)A Partner for Fem!Shepard as she goes through the N7 Academy! This character can either be male or female, drell or human, biotic, etc. Get creative. Give me a backstory of why they want to be N7 and what their combat specialty would be, what kind of weapons they'd prefer, etc. They must be the same age as Shepard (15-16, I'll explain why N7 academy accepts teenagers, in story at a later date). If the character is male DO NOT write the character with the intention of

pairing the two off. I will personally decide that. When in doubt, assume they won't get together, romantically.

2) An Ambassador for the URSC (let's be honest you already know this is where the story is headed) that's quick witted and knows how to negotiate the URSC's strength toward the Council. ****This character MUST be a drell.**** Point blank. If your ambassador OC is human, it automatically is a "no."

3) A xenophobic Asari admiral, who has distaste for non-Citadel races. However, she is roughly the Asari equivalent of Admiral Preston Cole in combat. You must explain why she's xenophobic and feats of her tactical brilliance

4) A URSC fighter pilot working on jointly developed starfighter. If you want you can submit details of the fighter along with the profile if you wish, but it's not necessary

5)A URSC Navy Captain who gets the honor of commandeering the SSV (soon to be URSC) Daedalus, an Infinity-Class capital warship

6) Two Turian HUNTERS to complement Saren, Garrus, and Nihlus in Renegade Squadron. There really aren't any rules on this one, as I'll be very lenient on these submissions

7) Subordinates of Jack Harper. His right and Left-hand Men. Can be human or drell. Biotics, preferably, but not necessary. Loyalty is absolute.

8)A human xenobiologist.

That's all! I look forward to your submissions. These characters will play very important roles

9. Shock and Awe

****Mass Effect: The New Journey****

****Chapter Nine: **_Shock and Awe_****

Hey there guys! Sorry this took so long! My motherboard on my MacBook went out and I had to send in for repairs. Wiped out everything I had for this chapter and I lost some mojo. But it's not all bad. I installed a Solid-State-Drive and loaded up Mavericks from Lion (Yosemite didn't come out in time, dammit!), and it's running as smooth as butter. I just started school again, so that takes priority but I will try my best to update as much as can and as often as I can.

Disclaimer: I make no claim of anything except my own work. Mass Effect, Halo, and Titanfall are under the rights of Bioware, 343 Industries, and Respawn Entertainment, as well as the publishing rights of Electronic Arts, Microsoft Game Studios, and Activision, all respectively.

* * *

><p>Zestiria, Southern Continent of Solana

****Kaon Desert ****

****November 3****rd****, 2167, 72 Alliance Standard hours
Post-Batarian invasion****

Jerome-092 crouched down behind the rugged boulders on a hill overlooking a giant three hundred meter tall, dilapidated overpass. The once mighty and enormous structure had fallen to acts of war and attrition by both the Batarian and Zestirian militaries, respectively. Their allies put up a valiant resistance, but unfortunately, without the access to Alliance grade weaponry and technology, it was only a matter of time before their invaders wiped them out.

Hundreds upon hundreds of Batarian, Draxian, and Caelean corpses littered the desert-tundra and at around fifteen kilometers out, the Spartan could see a massive forward operating base that was set up in haste. There were literally hundreds, if not _thousands_ of Batarian invaders and vehicles, of which consisted of APCs, dropships, Mantis gunships, and even atmospheric fighters. Just at a mere glance, he could tell the Batarians had decades, if not _centuries_, to perfect their logistical capabilities. Within three standard Alliance days they had manage to set up forward operating bases across the planet and was able to consistently keep their _massive_ ten million-plus troop invasion force supplied and well fed. It chillingly reminded him of some of the feats the Covenant had pulled off early on in the war and later on during the Fall of Reach, when the _Long Night of Solace_ _did by_ _itself_ what would take a massive number of UNSC ships and Rapid Reaction Force troops at the time.

In spite of this, the SPARTAN-II empathized greatly with the Zestrians, knowing first hand what it was like to fight for your home. He and his team were still adjusting to the idea of their former enemies now being close allies to the UNSC, and now Alliance. He suppressed a sigh, knowing that it mattered little now of all times, seeing as how the event was _technically_ almost 130 years ago. Banishing those thoughts aside for the mission at hand, he contacted Tennu, the leader of the coveted Sangheili Ghost squad.

"Ghost-One, this is Red-One, radio check," Jerome keyed in over TEAMCOM.

There was a three second delay, standard protocol, before the alien responded. "Affirmative, OMEGA, our COMs are functional," Tennu replied, careful not to accidentally call Jerome a "Spartan". Encrypted their radios may have been, even a century and some change later after arriving in a new galaxy, they'd still didn't want questions being raised. Such knowledge could potentially tear the Systems Alliance asunder with rather volatile consequences.

Jerome nodded. "Good to hear."

Malik verbally snorted, his annoyance plain as day even over the radio. "Let it be known that I find us sneaking around like cowards displeases me, OMEGA," he spat with contempt. "We are warriors! Not assassins who slither in the dark."

"â€|I find that highly ironic considering your allies call you and your teammates the 'Ghosts', " Douglas-042, also a member of Red

Team, chimed in. Dor'n verbally laughed out loud, the female Sangheili clearly was amused. Fin, the Ghost's recon and scout, rolled his dark eyes but otherwise said nothing.

Malik huffed, but stayed silent, conceding to the SPARTAN's point.

"Stick to the plan, Tenu. Take the VIP and we'll handle the rest, " Jerome assured, getting back to business and then standing up.

"Affirmative," was all the Sangheili said before disconnecting TEAMCOM.

"Alice, how are our vehicles looking?"

The only female member of Red Team was busy fine-tuning adjustments to three of the newest vehicles added to the Systems Alliance inventory, the M321C Rapid Reconnaissance Vehicle, or affectionately known as the "***Cheetah***", by Alliance Marines who field-tested on Axiom Prime. Cheetahs were light, one-manned hover bikes introduced and prototyped in 2165 with some input from Draxian Engineers. As the name implies, it was by far the fastest vehicle in service with the Systems Alliance military.

"They should be good. The turbulence when we dropped in from the _Dawn_ knocked a few wires out of place, but nothing too big of a hassle. The LSE (Liquid-State-Electronics) would've compensated, but I repaired it anyhow. Can't be too careful, no?"

"Agreed," Jerome replied simply, checking the ammo of his AA-48 Extreme Close Quarters shotgun. It was full, as was his sidearm. Strolling over to the Cheetah closest to him, Jerome mounted it easy enough, as did both Alice and Douglas. Touching the handles, the Liquid State Electronics inside the computer systems synchronized with the Spartan Neural Link and the Heads-Up-Display in their MJOLNIR armor.

Using propulsion drives reverse engineered from the Covenant's Ghosts, the bikes raised a foot and a half off the ground. With the bike's recognizing them as OMEGA-class super soldiers, they could travel at the vehicle's _true_ top speed of over 360kph.

Revving the engines up one last time the Spartans sped off down the overpass at nearly 100kph, avoiding going faster to avoid any dust clouds that might give away their position.

"This is Sierra Zero-Nine-Two broadcasting to any Alliance ships in orbit above Sector Charlie Five-One-Two, Kaon, requesting firing support. Does anyone copy, over?"

After thirty seconds of radio silence, he was greeted by a response, _"Sierra Zero-Nine-Two, this is the SSV Omaha, call sign Badger Two, we read you loud and clear_."

Jerome couldn't believe his luck. It'd been a while since he had received help from a ship that originated in the Milky Way, but from one from Infinity's complement of Strident-class frigates?

"Badger-Two, we have a Sangheili team on-site at these coordinates with capture orders of a VIP as well as to halt any invasion of the mainland. Can you provide assistance?"

Several pauses followed before, "_That's an affirmative, Sierra, but be advised our fire support will be limited as we're in an orbit around the planet, Admiral's orders. You will only have our help for as long as our weapons can adequately target them. You aren't the only team who needs our help_."

Jerome held back a sigh. "Understood Badger-Two, I'll be sending you firing coordinates, shortly."

"_Copy, Sierra. Badger-Two over and out_." The line went dead.

The team leaned left with their Cheetahs speeding down a highway subsection that had been damaged by Zesterian bombs and artillery. Alice eyed towards Jerome.

"Lieutenantâ€¦did Badger-Two just tactfully tell us to go fuck ourselves?"

"Pretty much."

He could hardly blame them. The vast majority of the Alliance fleet was, at the moment, busy mopping the floor with the Batarian warships near the outer edge of Vixa. Close-Air-Support was also limited, as they had to establish air supremacy first and foremost. They were in a small sector of a planet that had a literal billions fighting for their lives.

"Ghost-One, this is Red-One," Jerome keyed in once more as he revved up the speed of the Cheetah; they were closing in on 130kph. They would reach the Batarian base within five minutes, tops.

"_Go ahead, Red-One." _

Jerome got straight to the point. "Hold position, we have an orbital strike incoming! Red-Two is uploading the coordinates now."

"_Plasma or Kinetic_?" It was a valid question seeing as how either method substantially changed the tactics of whoever called it in.

"Kinetic," Jerome confirmed.

"_Understood_."

Jerome cut the connection, knowing that the Ghosts would move on their own after the strikes occurred.

"_Red-One be advised, orbital strikes are inbound_."

Jerome couldn't help but smile. The Batarians were about to have one hell of a rude awakening.

* * *

><p>Batarian Forward Operating Base

****Codename "Sal'shan" ****

Waving a few glow sticks that were luminous enough to even be visible during the daytime, Sergeant Grivak Tarks, of the Hegemony's 21st Equipment Maintenance Squadron guided a Mantis gunship towards an open designated spot, acting as a somewhat an air controller and mainly a crew chief. Around him dozens of other crew chiefs were hard at work repairing vehicles to including _Tridents_, the Hegemony's premiere fighter for atmospheric operations. All of the crew chiefs were still armed, with at least a sidearm or small submachine gun, in the off chance the base was attacked.

Hovering for a few more seconds, Tarks made sure the area was clear, then gave the all clear for the pilot to make a smooth landing. The pilot stepped out and craned his neck, stretching it. Tarks saluted, recognizing him as an officer, a lieutenant to be precise.

The pilot grunted, but returned the formality half-assed. Tarks refused to show his contempt; he was a professional soldier of the Hegemony's forces, not some low life _pirate_.

"Any damages worth noting, sir?" Tarks inquired, getting down to business. Repairing vehicles was his lifeblood and the military provided an endless supply of them. He was practically in heaven, even if he was under constant threat of fire from their invasion.

"More along the electronics and near the engines," the pilot replied, as they both surveyed damages. The hull had a few bullet holes and plasma burn marks. Tarks surmised the latter were from small arms fire, as the vagrants' vehicles didn't have weaponry that had coated hybrid rounds. It was fascinating technology, to say the least.

Tarks brought his Omni-tool and did a more in-depth scan. "Hmmâ€¦ seems you might have some steering issues."

"The joystick did feel a bit off when I landed."

"All right," the Batarian replied getting a wrench and tools. "I'll have it patched up within the next few hours."

The Lieutenant mumbled a half-sincere "thanks" and walked off. Tarks rolled his eyes, but didn't take it personally. He went on about his work.

Elsewhere, inside Sal'Shan's main headquarters a strategic meeting between the base commander and among other high-ranking officers was taking place.

"Colonel, we're in a precarious situation right now. You should've captured the Kings by now!" roared General Norvan Ra'ath, slamming his fist on the desk, as he saw Colonel Gi'lal wince, ever so slightly.

"General, we've occurred massive losses. Those Devil Troopers are cutting down are forces as if we're mere children!"

Devils. That was the nickname for the armored beings that stood nearly two and a half meters and fought with skill and ferocity that

would give even Asari Commandos pause.

"What about our S.T.R.I.K.E teams?" the general asked calmly, even though he was utterly furious internally. The Strategic Tactical Response for Interplanetary Key Emergencies, or S.T.R.I.K.E, was the Hegemony's all purpose covert Special Forces group, operating with tremendous skill and secrecy. The closest comparison galactic wide were the Turian's Blackwatch division. They were the only soldiers in the Hegemony that the Council races even remotely took serious. It wasn't arrogance, really. Compared to the Council races' infantry divisions, even with the efforts to modernize after decades of stagnation in the last seven years, the Hegemony's professional force was outclassed considerably, being outnumbered, outgunned, and significantly more disciplined and well trained council military with a considerable technological edge to boot.

"Except for the few fireteams I have left, all of them are dead." He was blunt. No need to sugarcoat it. To say the Devils had utterly **massacred** S.T.R.I.K.E would be the biggest understatement in the Galaxy.

The General's heart sunk to the bottom of his stomach. There were nearly five-thousand S.T.R.I.K.E operatives in their capital city a few days ago and most of them had been wiped out?! Even Asari Commandos took no chances with S.T.R.I.K.E!

"Generalâ€|we've underestimated them greatly."

"Correction, we underestimated their allies. I've lost contact with Captain Hanma for quite some time. We have to assume the worse."

There was silence. "How long?"

"Do we have to hold out? Unknown. We've captured a good many slaves already. The Hegemony may or may not assist us. We may be on our own for a while. In which case we'll have to make do and conquer this world. If notâ€|you still have your codes?"

Gilal's eyes hardened considerably, understanding the implication. "I do. General, if we do this, there's no telling how they'llâ€!"

"Forget these vagrants! If we receive the orderâ€|you know what must be done. I'm sending as many reinforcements as I can spare. This continent is still has a plethora of vagrant resistance." He then unceremoniously cut the connection off, not even bothering with a proper farewell.

He worked in silence for a few minutes before he felt the air go still. All four of his eyes widened simultaneously.

* * *

><p>Tarks was busy replacing burnt out electronics on the Mantis when he felt an ominous feeling in the pits of his stomach. Gazing up towards the sky he saw several objects falling through the atmosphere at massively hypersonic speeds. His heart sunk.<p>

"INCOMING STâ€!" he tried to warn, but it was far, far too late. The

payload from SSV Omaha's Mk 2488 MAC, or Onager, slammed right into the heart of the airfield of the forward operating base. The effect was instantaneous. The Onager round hitting the gunship he was repairing atomized Tarks. Tons of concrete was thrown into the air, as multiple vehicles were destroyed.

It didn't stop there. The salvos kept coming as the Omaha bombed Sal'Shan from orbit. The entire camp was in chaos and pandemonium.

Batarian soldiers who were peacefully napping in their barracks were violently thrown from their cots as more shockwaves from the SSV Omaha continued to bomb the forward operating base from the safety of geosynchronous orbit. They immediately scrambled, tumbling all over each for a chance to get the armory to fight an unknown enemy.

Red Team spread through the camp at well over 150 kilometers an hour causing even more confusion, the SPARTAN-II fireteam wanting the four-eyed invaders to keep their attention on them.

"DEVILS!" came the shout of one Batarian trooper. Raising his assault rifle he fired aimlessly, trying to put as many rounds downrange as he could, not even bothering with accuracy. Jerome responded in kind by accelerating and firing the Cheetah's built-in twin barreled 12.9X90mm hybrid rounds. Plasma-kinetic technology had grown leaps and bounds in the century since it was introduced to the Systems Alliance, as when it was used in combination with element zero, it's raw weaponization potential was practically limitless.

Hybrid rounds tore through the primitive shielding of the Batarian invaders, as Red team spread throughout the entire camp. In Jerome's Heads-Up-Display, he was marking targets and the Liquid State Electronics synchronized. He pressed the trigger. From the nose of the Cheetah, several missiles fired at a communications tower, similar aesthetically to the jamming rigs Fireteam ARCLIGHT had destroyed in the Zestirian capital of Kastella.

"Tower's down! They've got no way for backup!" Jerome shouted over TEAMCOM.

"Roger, Red-One!" Alice acknowledged, back.

"_Red-One, this is Badger Two, do you copy over?" _

"Red-One here, go ahead, Badger-Two."

"_Be advised, we've done all we've can at this time. We hit the bastards pretty hard! However, we're picking up massive thermal signatures east of your position. Seems like we got their attention. Command is sending a battalion of Orbital Assault Troopers, ETA: five minutes." _

Jerome actually blinked in surprise. He wasn't expecting any OMEGA or Spartans for reinforcement, but OATs? In popular military culture for civilians, it was assumed that the Titan Drop Shock Troopers were the most elite soldiers in the Systems Alliance. Despite their tremendous skill and track record, this was _completely_ false by pretty much every metric possible, even if you didn't count the UNSC's SPARTAN divisions, OMEGA, or the Sangheili Special Operations groups. In truth, the Alliance Orbital Assault Trooper was unquestionably the

most well armed, well trained, and toughest soldiers in the Alliance. The ODSs of the Milky Way didn't hold a candle to them, though that was more so due to the OATs having technology far surpassing the ODSs of 2570.

Like the TDST, they dropped in from ships orbiting a planet in geosynchronous orbit, using cheap, but highly durable, drop pods. That, however, was where the similarities ended. The TDST dropped in before enemy lines, taking territory as they went, piloting Stryder, Atlas, and Ogre Titan mechs. What most didn't know, was that Orbital Assault Troopers dropped with them, but they dropped behind enemy lines, in front of, and sometimes even in the middle! While the TDST was supposed to be light-infantry, emphasizing constant movement using parkour and free running skills, OATs were supposed to be walking tanks. Close range, Long Ranged, Melee, CQC, Vehicular warfare, Martial-Arts, it didn't matter. OATs were skilled in all forms of direct action combat.

"Can your team hold out till, then?" The question was obviously redundant considering he was talking a super soldier who had eighty-plus years of combat experience counting his time here in this new galaxy. But, alas, protocol was protocol.

Jerome smirked. "Will do, sir."

"Affirmative, Red-One. Good Hunting."

The radio went dead as Jerome stepped off of his bike. Batarian soldiers were taking up defensive positions and setting up turrets to defend their temporary Forward Operating Base. None of this even fazed Jerome as he reached for the AA-40 magnetically attached to his back armor plating. He pumped it one single time.

"Let's dance."

With that silent challenge the lone SPARTAN-II used MJOLNIR XII's boosters and leapt over ten meters into the air right into the hornet's nest of several Batarian troopers.

"Say four eyes? My species has a saying: war is hell," he began, as the soldiers nearly wet themselves at just his mere presence, considering they had heard rumors that even STRIKE stood next to no chance, even with superior numbers! "Guess what? I'm the devil."

For a brief two seconds, Jerome saw all the signs of anxiety, fear, and hopelessness of the, supposedly, Hegemony's finest. Their eyes widened to their greatest extent. The sweat that rolled down their brow, dripped down and splashed soil of the Zestirain homeworld. Finally, the subtle reach for their weapons to fire madly in a vain attempt to stop the SPARTAN-II.

Jerome didn't give them the chance.

Using speed that would even impress Kelly-087, Jerome raised his shotgun, aimed, and held down the trigger. Three Batarian soldiers heads exploded one after the other. Jerome was gone and was already pouncing on his next prey before their bodies even hit the ground.

He had heard from intelligence reports on the Dawn of an Era that

these invaders nicknamed the OMEGA troopers "Devils."

By the graces of the Forerunners themselves he'd be more than happy to live up to that reputation.

* * *

><p>Vixa System, 20,000 kilometers from
Zestiria

On board Alliance carrier **_SSV Barack H. Obama**_

Colonel Tyson Lamont Greystone was waiting. The veteran Titan Drop Shock Trooper was in a secluded area of the Titan Deployment Hangar, brooding. Doing diagnostics both self-inflicted and with a technician, he was armed and ready. His MA6A assault rifle had a fresh 64-clip magazine with 16 more to spare on his person. It was the same for his sidearm as well, the Alliance built "Smart Pistol", which in deadly hands could target several targets at once with a little patience and timing. His armor's shielding had improved leaps and bounds over the past decade, easily comparable to the MJOLNIR Mark VI.

All in all, the now famous (or infamous to the pirates and rebels he and the teams he lead slaughtered) Titan Pilot was ready for all out war. Judging from the reports and rumors, the situation was on the ground was grim, at least for the Zestirian denizens. But Greystone was used to it. He had spent almost twenty years the TDST and long since put the nightmares of war behind.

He perked up, sensing a presence behind him. "Colonel, we drop in five," said the drell operative who made his presence known. Greystone smiled knowing that voice anywhere: Sergeant Major Tarius Krios. The two had been best friends ever since they had met in training almost two decades ago and Command, in a rare move, had allowed them to stay together seeing that the two together brought results. Tyson commanded a full regiment of 10th TDST Divison, 1st Corps. The Regiment had its fair share of majors, captains, and other junior officers, but it was almost universally understood that Sergeant Major Krios was the Colonel's right hand man.

"Good to hear, Sergeant Major," he replied tersely, slightly alarming his best friend. With a few glances to make sure most were out of earshot, he spoke his mind.

"Tyson, you okay, bro?"

Tyson sighed, shaking his head, being truthful seeing as how Tarius would call him out the moment any sort of lie left his lips. "This is supposed to be a routine dropâ€¦I've been scared before Tarius, but not anything like thisâ€¦if this were two months ago, I would've dropped with you no problem, butâ€¦"

Tarius now knew, _immediately, _why he was anxious and terrified. "You're worried about Alyx, aren't you?" It was more of a statement than a rhetorical question.

"Got it in, one," Tyson confirmed standing up, whimsically smiling at the drell. Even twenty years later, he'd never get used to just how well Tarius knew him. Of course he was worried about Alyxandria

"Alyx" Shepard. His daughter was thirteen, going on fourteen, and she was the result of a casual fling he had with Hannah almost fifteen years ago. Hannah was a Lieutenant on a Temporary-Duty-Assignment on Eden Prime and Tyson was a Sergeant in the TDST's 14th Division. For the most part, Hannah had ignored any potential suitors, focusing on her career turning every male down gently, but firmly. That all changed when she met one Tyson Lamont Greystone in a training exercise over Eden Prime. In one of those rare instances, Hannah was attracted to Tyson first, even in spite of the fact that Alliance regulations strictly prohibited fraternization. Through a series of events, partying, drinking, celebrating after raids of pirates back at their stations, both parties gave in into the temptation.

This would go on and on for a total of six monthsâ€”the entirety of Hannah's temporary dutyâ€”until they formally ended it the night before she would leave heading to Axiom Prime to attend the System Alliance's Naval Spacial Warfare Academy or NSWA, to learn advanced tactics in ship-to-ship combat as well as courses geared toward strategy and troop deployments. They had decided to have one last night of their casual relationship in which only Tarius was aware of the full details.

Unbeknownst to Tyson, that was the night that Hannah became pregnant. Upon learning of her pregnancy, Hannah dropped all contact with the TDST pilot, without an explanation. Vid-calls, emails, letters, it didn't matter. All were ignored. Hannah had to forgo going to the academy, much to her superiors' disappointment. On 11 April 2154, she gave birth to a perfectly healthy baby girl and named her Alyxandria, she inherited her father's jet black hair, but her mother's cerulean blue eyes. For thirteen years, Hannah kept the existence of her daughter secret from Tyson, and for a legitimate reason: had the Alliance found out she had committed fraternization on literally dozens of accounts (it was one person, but even still), in the best case scenario her career would be pretty much over and she would stay a Lieutenant till her contract was up. She joined the Alliance to get away from her family and there was no way in hell they'd help out to take care of Alyx if her time with the Alliance was prematurely terminated.

Now that Tyson was not only an officerâ€”a full birdâ€”', but also practically a legendary pilot in the TDST and she a Captain within the Navy who was being considered for Rear Admiral, they had practically an absurd amount of pull and influence within their respective fields. Too many politicians and higher ups owed them favors for any fraternization charge to hold any amount of weight in a court martial case. Not to mention, the statue of limitations, similar to civilian courts, had long passed as well.

Initially, the colonel was livid beyond reason that Hannah had kept his daughter from him for almost a decade and a half, but calmed himself soon as the Captain explained her reasoning.

"You know I think you should count yourself pretty lucky," Tarius commented, as they walked to their designated drop pods. They were going to drop right on top of the southern section of the palace. They weren't going to rescue the Kings, no. They were the distraction while a black ops team extracted the two monarchs.

"How so?" Tyson asked as he saluted two pilots.

"You and Alyx hit it off almost instantly as if you were there her whole life. I'm going to be honest: I thought the girl was gonna resent you and hate you and then after several heart-to-hearts she warms up to you and bam, you two have a wonderful relationship."

Tyson laughed. "You've been watching too many sitcoms, bro." Tarius gave him an amused shrug, half-heartedly.

"Call it like I see it," he defended.

"I guess you're right."

The drell stopped Colonel Greystone and looked him square in the eye. "Look, you love Alyx, right?"

"More than you know," He admitted, biting his lip and glancing downwards. It was truth from the deepest depths of his soul. They only got to spend time for a month together before his current deployment, but Tyson already developed a paternal instinct, something he'd never thought of before!

"Then use that, alright. I'm speaking as your best friend, not your right-hand-man. When you're in the heat of combat, just think about her and coming home. You might have missed out on her early lifeâ€|but that doesn't mean you can't make up for it."

Upon hearing those words, the Colonel realized Tarius was right. He had to fight and win. Not just for the Alliance, but for his daughter. "You really got a way with words, you know that?"

He shrugged and smirked. "I may have taken a course or two," he joked. The drop alarm was blaring inside the carrier as hundreds of TDST pilots scrambled to their pods. Titan mechs were being prepped for deployment as well.

"Looks like that time," Tyson noted. He gave the drell a brotherly embrace. "To hell and back?"

"To hell and back," Tarius replied resolutely, doing their drop ritual they had done, literally, hundreds of times.

"See you on the ground!" Tyson told him as he stepped in his pod and secured his MA6A assault rifle. Tarius gave him a half professional and half-mock salute and quickly hurried into his own OIV. Tyson took out a small photo of when he and Alyx had gone to an amusement park on Axiom Prime. He nodded, his resolve hardened and tucked the picture away.

"Raphael, I need a sitrep and mission recap," he asked the A.I. inside his Orbital Insertion Vehicle.

"Affirmative, Colonel. As you know, the Alliance has void dominance by an insane degree. We've only lost a little over a two-hundred of our ships, most of them being frigates and destroyers. Director Xavier has ordered all carriers back to liberate Zestiria. We're working on gaining air supremacy, but that has taken longer than expected," Raphael solemnly reported. He brought up a map of the Palace in Kastella, relative to the rest of the city. Tyson couldn't

help but groan. The palace was practically a city into itself! This was one of those times where he absolutely hated the fact that the Pact built everything ridiculously oversized.

"A black ops team has been sent to rescue the Kings. You and your infantry division, along with a contingency of Orbital Assault Troopers, will drop in the middle of the southern part of the city where most of the Batarian troops are concentrated as a distraction. You'll need to move swiftly. I cannot overstate the political implications of rescuing their leaders." The colonel knew for sure. Once these bastards were kicked off the planet, the URSC was practically guaranteed to form.

"Who's the black ops team performing the rescue op? N7? OATs?"

"No. ARCLIGHT and Blue Team."

Tyson nearly choked on his saliva in shock. "The OMEGAs are here?!" Yes, Tyson knew of the OMEGA, as did a handful of TDST pilots who were sworn to secrecy under penalty of execution. The OMEGA and some of the Sangheili Spec Ops squadrons had toyed with his best pilots as if they were mere kindergarteners!

"Yes. It seems Director Xavier intends to reveal them after this war is over."

"Well, I'll be dammed." He felt his pod moving as the mechanisms holding it in place were moving hundreds of OIVs over the drop point. From his view he could see forty Pegasus drop ships loaded with Marines and Army Infantry, link up with the A-200 Xiphos, an atmospheric only, attack fighter. The Xiphos, named after the ancient Greek Sword, was aesthetically extremely similar to the Fairchild Republic A-10 Thunderbolt-II in the 20th and early 21st century, except it was now a dull grey-black color with a slick, futuristic 22nd century design and had VTOL capability. The Xiphos was for air-to-ground, Close-Air-Support, and forward control. As such, it was strictly an atmospheric fighter, unlike the Rapier that could dogfight in space. Therefore, Pegasus dropships linked up with the fighter and ferried them in space from the carrier. Once the atmosphere was breached at a certain altitude, the pilot, who was already inside the cockpit from the carrier, would unfold the wings, rev up the twin fusion engines and detach from the dropship and go on to complete his or her mission. Most of the time, Xiphos pilots had an operation wholly independent from the Pegasus that ferried them, often times the two ships flew in completely opposite directions once separated.

"30 seconds to drop!"

"All Fireteams this is Colonel Greystone! Once we drop I want us to give those four eye bastards a taste of what happens when you piss off the TDST Corps! Hit 'em fast and hit 'em hard! Fireteams Switchback, Razor, Delta, and Hopper, you're with me! Standard formation, TITANFALL will be in two minutes!"

"Sir!" they acknowledged.

"Good luck, gentlemen and ladies!"

The light overhead turned from red to green. Tarius did the honors

this time and roared over the COM.

"That's the signal! Drop! Drop! Drop! Deploy! Deploy!"

With a violent shake, Colonel Greystone, and thousands of other Orbital Insertion Vehicles, dropped from the belly of the SSV Barack H. Obama. Five hundred kilometers from the Obama, the carriers George H.W. Bush and Mikhail Gorbachev dropped their payloads of both TDST and OATs, no doubt to the Southern Continent. Even with the initial troop landings of the Alliance after Fireteam ARCLIGHT destroyed the jamming rigs, that was merely the first wave of an overwhelming force.

"Sergeant Krios, you all right buddy?" Tyson joked, as the pods breached the atmosphere, the higher gravity of Zestiria pulling them down at a noticeable faster rate.

"You kidding, sir? Best roller coaster ride I've ever been on!"

"Everyone weapons check! I want us to come out guns slinging! Anything that doesn't look like a human, drell, a giant lizard, or amphibian, you're to terminate with extreme prejudice."

"â€|Sir?" a TDST pilot, a corporal, asked making sure he had heard that right.

"You heard me correctly, son," Tyson replied as the dark void of space vanished and the clouds of Zestiria and its gargantuan capital came into view. "We have orders straight from the Director himself to deal with these slavery shitheads. Outside of a few V. who are being captured for intelligence purposes as we drop, our orders are clear as a sunny day: not a single Batarian soldier is making it off this planet alive. Period. Oorah?"

"OORAH!"

Finally, they reached thirty thousand feet and the palace, even at thirty thousand feet above ground was clearly visible. Even the veterans of the Drop Corps had to pause. The entire city was in flames, fighter jets were dogfighting by the dozens below them and from what the Colonel could tell, the entire city was being besieged from all sides.

Suddenly, two Orbital Insertion Vehicles exploded violently, the pilots perishing and their remains falling by gravity.

"INCOMING FLAK! Evasive maneuvers!"

The pilots didn't need to be told twice. Rotating his joystick, Tyson was able to predict and ultimately dodge the amount of Flak rounds being dished out by artillery on the ground. He had heard that the Batarians were sort of old school with their technology but this was ridiculous! The shaking intensified as the hundreds of drop pods skillfully as they could anticipated the anti-air rounds that were attempting to destroy the TDST operatives.

"Fuck! Colonel, there's no way in hell we're going to make it!"

"Quit your yapping, Lieutenant!" a captain roared out over the COM.

Tyson grimaced, almost starting to agree with the El-Tee. However, the last thing he expected happened: He was being hailed. In the middle of a goddamn drop? He answered it reluctantly.

"Colonel Greystone, here!"

"It seems you are in need of my aid again, Colonel," a familiar voice spoke over the COM. Tyson, along with every veteran TDST pilot's eyes widened in shock.

"Rtas?"

As if to hammer the point home, a large slipspace portal appeared above the entire city. Exiting from it, was the Sangheili's flagship, the Shadow of Intent. The massive Covenant Assault Carrier casted a giant shadow even over Kastella.

With precision and accuracy as deadly as it once was in the Human-Covenant War, the starboard brow glowed purple and shot out a devastating pulse laser right at the artillery nest that were busy trying to shoot anything out of the sky. The magnificent weapon shot out like an arrow and boiled the slavers at temperatures over 3000 degrees Celsius. Several buildings tumbled as the plasma withered away at even the most modern designs, crashing into the nearby river, the splash big enough to flood several streets.

"Oh, HELL YEAH!"

"That's what I'm talking about!"

"Take that you four-eyed bastards! Eat plasma!"

Tyson couldn't help but join his men and grin. "Good God, Rtas, never thought I'd see you again, let alone save my ass. Thanks."

Rtas waived him off. "Your thanks is not needed. These vermin are weak and they will die by our blades. There is much to do, Greystone. I shall be in touch. The Arbiter sends his regards." With that said, the Sangheili Special Operations Commander cut off the link. From the hangar bay, Tyson could see hundreds of Phantoms, Banshees, Seraphs, all no doubt carrying the some of the most experienced warriors in the Sangheili Empire.

"All right, the LZ's clear and hot! Deploying chutes!" No sooner than when it was called, hundreds of chutes shot out of the top of the OIVs and slowed their descent considerably.

"Impact within ten seconds colonel!" Raphael called out.

"TITAN Command, this is Colonel Greystone, we're approaching LZ Jayhawk, confirm TITANFALL."

"_Colonel, that's affirmative, TITANFALL will be in two minutes as promised," came the reply from TITAN command onboard the _Obama_.

Ten seconds later, Greystone and the others from Fireteams

Switchback, Razor, Delta, and Hopper slammed to the ground, inside the walls of the Royal Palace which had become a battlefield.

Tyson and thirty-one other pilots leapt out on to the battlefield. All 32 pilots were sprinting towards their objective: provide a distraction till the OMEGA were able to safely get the Kings out by any means necessary.

To their immediate right, was a squad of Batarian infantry. Tarius' squad wasted no time to gun them down with plasma-kinetic rounds of the MA6A assault rifle. They fell down easily back into the foxhole they had dug out.

"Holy shit, sir," a surprised Staff Sergeant Derek Frost exclaimed as he took cover behind a statue of the Caleans' King, Xade, along with Colonel Greystone and Tarius. So much for freerunning. They were pinned down by a machine gun nest.

"Is it just me or do these four eyed bastards not have any shielding at all?!" Frost yelled over the cacophony of battle, popping out of cover to fire four burst rounds of the M-55 Enhanced Battle Rifle. Ironically enough, his own shields flared, evidently some of the bullets from the invaders weapons grazing him. He ducked backed down to give them a chance to recharge.

"Tarius you're the tech expert, the hell's going on?"

"Give me a sec!" the drell roared as he worked his magic on his tablet as VISR 5.5 scanned his enemies. "Oh, wow," he said, mildly surprised.

"What is it?"

"They do have shielding. Our weapons simply bypass them."

"Is that right?" Tyson smirked. This was going to be a cakewalk, then.

"_Colonel Greystone, this is TITAN command, your titans are prepped for launch, call them in when ready." _

"Frost, Jones, Faren, Valos!" he called out to the TDST pilots. "Call your Titans in now! I want Stryders up front, Ogres hanging out here with some suppressive fire!" he ordered.

Nodding, the four pilots did as they were told and aimed a green laser indicated where they wanted their Titans dropped.

"_Command copies all. Standby for TITANFALL." _Four objects fell from geosynchronous orbit and aided by boosters, began to fall even faster than TDST's OIVs. At 400 meters above the ground the meteor shaped objects exploded outwards, dropping two Stryders, an Atlas, and an Ogre. All four Titans were covered in a bubble shield. Four pilots scrambled as ordered, the bubble shield protecting them from mass accelerator rounds. Checking diagnostics as quickly as possible, nothing was found damaged.

"All, right boys!" Colonel Greystone grinned. "Now the real fun, begins!"

His pilots couldn't agree more.

* * *

><p>Royal Palace, 100 meters below, Royal Bunker codename "Kings' Shield"

November 3**rd****, 2167. **

Situated deep below the Royal Palace, was a bunker that was considered the most heavily fortified underground base in Zestiria, Kings Shield. Unlike "LNOS", which was classified above Top Secret, Kings Shield was very well known to the public with its defenses and protective measures shrouded in mystery and legend. The Zestirians loved their Kings and as such, spare no expense when it came to their protection. Nothing short of 50-megaton nuclear weapon hitting the palace at ground zero could penetrate the bunker.

"Have you heard from Commander Zora, Captain ?" asked Xade, the Calaen half of the Zestirian's dual monarchy. Xade was enormous, even by Calean standards, the lizard alien stood roughly at 11'4" tall and wore blue and gold ceremonial armor that was remarkably similar to the armor that Thel Vadam' had worn in his battles alongside SPARTAN-IV Jameson Locke, except obviously fit for his own species. On top of his head was a blue headpiece that was six inches in height, showing his regal status as a King of Zestiria.

Captain Tarx, also a Calean, sighed deeply. "No, your Majesty. We've lost contact with the Intelligence Team. If he hasn't reported in by nowâ€|"

"You mustn't lose faith, Captain," came the gentle and wise voice of the Draxian king, Xuen. Xuen was dressed in red and gold robes fitting of a scholar, rather than a warrior as his fellow monarch was. He, too, was tall for his species, standing at 6'3". Unlike Xade's crown, his was red and went around his entire head, similar to European Royalty in 16th century.

"But your Majestyâ€!" Tarx started, before Xuen held up a hand firmly, indicating that the Calean needed to be silent. Tarx obeyed immediately.

"Captain, you are one of our most treasured warriors. Long have you and the other Royal Guard have insured his Majesty King Xade's safety, even now with these beasts who dare to attack our people. Commander Zora said he would bring back help, then he will. He has not failed before, then he shall not now," Xuen told him resolutely, leaving the lizard alien a bit stunned. If it was even possible, upon hearing the unwavering faith of their King, each member of the Royal Guard's desire to protect their Majesty grew even fiercer, their loyalty as solid as Titanium-A3.

"I...understand." Tarx bowed his head in shame. "I apologize for my cowardice your Majesty."

Xuen, in response, gently butted his forehead against the Captain of the Royal Guard, shocking him to his core; even Xade was surprised at the gesture. It was a common ritual amongst Caleans, as a sign of affection, both platonic and romantic. In some contexts, another sentient being affectionately butting heads with a Calean was the

equivalent of a passionate romantic kiss among humans and the drell. Obviously, in this context, it wasn't the case, being platonic.

"You are no coward, Captain," Xuen told him, with both hands on his shoulders. "But you must not lose your faith. They believe in you, His Majesty Xade believes in you, I believe in you, and now it's time for you to start to believe in yourself." The wise and kind King removed his head.

"Thank you, your Majesty," Tarx replied in eternal gratefulness, to which the Draxian nodded. Usually, the only ones who melded with the Kings were the members of the Royal family, so in this Tarx felt extremely humbled that the Draxian King showed this level of affection to someone who was beneath him in rank, prestige, and stature. His resolve returned, he began barking out orders. "You there! I want a full sweep of the perimeterâ€¦"

"It seems you have a way with words, your Majesty," Xade intoned as the Calean King came and stood by Xuen. The difference in height was enormous and although Xade could physically destroy his fellow monarch in a contest of strength, he had deep respect for the King's wisdom, humility, and ingenuity. He treated him as an equal.

"I only told him what he needed to hear, your Majesty," Xuen replied dismissively. "Ultimately, my words were only the tool. It was up to him to take it to heart."

Xade gave him an amused grin. "Were it so easy." He then turned serious. "Your Majesty, if we are to survive these coming daysâ€¦what shall we do?"

Xuen's eyes narrowed, the calm, collected and air of knowledge replaced by indisputable rage. "These beasts will pay for what they've done. An injustice like this cannot, and will not go unpunished. I may not enjoy conflict, for I know first hand of it's traumatizing effects, but thisâ€¦were I to stand by and let my pacifism rule logic and reasoning it would be an utter insult to all of our fellow Zestirian subjects who have died trying to protect us and, more importantly, our home!"

"Even if it means coming under the Alliance?" The question was semi-rhetorical as the Calean monarch had a pretty good idea of what his fellow King would retort.

"Your Majesty, I would step down as King and live life as a lowly peasant for the rest of my days if it meant my people can get justice," he told him earnestly. Xade knew that he meant it from the depths of his soul.

Xade made a fist. "By your word, your Majesty, if the Alliance wants to form the URSC, then you will have my full support."

"Thank you my friend," Xuen turned to him and gave him a true genuine smile. "I don'tâ€¦"

"Get down!" Tarx had tackled both monarch as the doors leading outside the bunker had been blasted open with enough C4 to level a mountain, which was more credit to the Draxian engineers who design this place, considering the ceiling didn't cave in.

Dozens of Batarian soldiers poured in laying down suppressive fire. Tarx recognized them immediately. They were S.T.R.I.K.E operatives, the Batarians' highly trained Special Forces unit. They'd be in for a damn long fight. Quickly throwing a flashbang, the STRIKE operatives were momentarily stunned. Popping from behind cover, Tarx fired his submachine gun mowing down as many as he could, before dragging Xuen and Xade to safety.

Several Royal Guard members were biotics and knew they were little match for the Batarian soldiers, so they did the next best thing: unpinning a grenade, one said a quick prayer for the safety of the Royal family and did a biotic charge. The resulting explosion killed a half a dozen STRIKE operatives due to the unpredictable nature of the attack.

Before the slavers could even retaliate a hail of gunfire roared out and the rest of them dropped dead simultaneously. Still shaking from the unusually short ordeal, Tarx popped his head out of cover to see what his ears had confirmed. All of them were dead, no questions asked.

Slowly, but surely, the Royal Guard came out of the cover, still on their guard in case there were more who would want to harm their Kings. "Who the hell took them out?"

Beyond the smoke, Blue Team and Fireteam ARCLIGHT decloaked, the SPARTAN-II and OMEGA fireteam checking their corners. Along with them was Zora Alyk and Noble Six.

"Zora?!" Tarx bellowed in shock.

"Told ya I'd come back. Plus I brought these guys along with me," he said pointing to probably the most skilled and deadly super soldiers in the Alliance.

"We're here to rescue you, your Majesties," John told the Kings respectfully, after magnetically attaching the weapon to his back.

Both Kings stared at the eleven soldiers in curiosity, before nodding. "Lead the way?"

"Call me Commander-117," John told the monarchs, who understood his need for a codename.

'_So, this is the famous Master Chief, eh? Now I see why you were so revered and feared. You as well, Noble Six, or should I say Nathan? Interesting days are ahead of us it seems,' _Xuen thought approvingly.

"Fred, Kelly, Mike, scout ahead, make sure none of them followed us back in the tunnels," John ordered. The three super soldiers nodded and activated active camouflage and sprinted ahead. He turned back to the rest of ARCLIGHT "Nathan and Julius, take point, Anya, Alastor, Sam, cover our six. Julius, you're with me. Stay close to the Kings and their families."

"Sir!"

Slowly, but surely, they lead the Kings and the Royal Families out of

the tunnels, heading topside. Cortana found it time to mention something that was bugging her.

"Chiefâ€¦something isn't right," she told him privately so none of the others could hear her. John paused, mentally, but kept moving as to not alarm the Royals.

"What is it? Are we walking into a trap?"

"No, it's not mission related. It's the Kingsâ€¦"

Now that caught John off guard, unsure of her meaning. "What are you talking about?" he asked her bluntly.

"Chief, normally when people see you or the OMEGAs there's a sense of awe and astonishment. The Kings didn't so much as flinch when they saw both our team and ARCLIGHT. Hell, not even their guards batted an eyelash. If I didn't know any better, I'd say they were expecting you."

With narrowed eyes, John finally asked the million-dollar-question. "Cortana, what are you trying to say? Outside of a few missions to keep my skills sharp in the field, I haven't left ARCHON since the Alliance first settled it."

"Exactly. John, what I'm saying is, the Kings know who you are."

"That's impossible," John retorted immediately. There was a zero percent chance that the Alliance would tell humans of how they had enormous technological jumps, let alone to an alien faction that wasn't even under their jurisdiction! "The Alliance wouldn't tellâ€¦unlessâ€¦" He trailed off as the unthinkable came to himâ€¦

"Unless they knew about you specifically **before** the Alliance even made contactâ€¦" Cortana told him, her voice dead serious.

A chill ran down the legendary soldier's spine. If what Cortana was saying was trueâ€¦there could be enormous repercussions. This was badâ€¦VERY bad.

"Cortana, when this is over, we need to talk to Admiral Lasky ASAP!"

"I couldn't agree more," Cortana agreed. He could 'feel' Cortana in his mind perk up. "Incoming transmission!"

"Umâ€¦Commander." It was SPARTAN-IV Fireteam Avalanche's squad leader. "We've got a problem."

Chief resisted the urge to sigh. He was actually hoping this would go smooth, but he should've known better.

"What is it, Lieutenant? This is a priority only, channel."

"Sir, they've rigged the entire city to go. Shiva-class. When this thing blows, half the city is going with it."

John's eyes widened. "Can you defuse it?"

"No, sir. It's old school, I mean real old school. These bastards really are like the Innies. Try and defuse it electronically, it blows. Blow it up before the countdown, the timer goes to zero instantly. Once the countdown started, detonation was _inevitable_."

"How much time do we have?"

"I'd sayâ€|five or six minutesâ€|give or take."

John cursed. "Lieutenant, take whoever you can and get the hell out of there, now!" He cut the connection and turned towards everyone else. "We need to move _**now**_. When I say now, I really do mean, NOW."

"Sir, is everything all right?"

"Those bastards have rigged a nuke to explode and there's no stopping it. We've got less than six minutes to get you topside and in the air before it detonates."

"Bloody hell! Those four eyed bastards!" Anya roared in disgust as she and the rescue team moved as quickly as they could.

Zora gripped his rifle. "Is it not enough that they want to enslave our race, but to permanently scar the world we call home?!"

Tarx growled. "There is no forgiveness for this."

Surprisingly, the Kings bowed their heads silently praying for the soldiers and citizens that would meet their end. It was inevitable. There wasn't a true way to save all of them.

"Cortana, call it in," Chief ordered.

"On it, Chief," she replied before broadcasting on every known Alliance frequency.

"_Attention all Zestirian and System Alliance hands, we have a probable nuclear threat in the city. I repeat we have a probably nuclear threat in the city. Evacuation order April. I repeat, evacuation order April! Everyone get the hell out of here!_" _

* * *

><p>Tyson and the Titan Drop Shock Troopers were halfway inside the palace fighting STRIKE soldiers before the broadcast came over.<p>

"â€|.Everyone get the hell out of here!"

"Holy shit, they're going to nuke the city?! Jesus Christ."

Tyson immediately bailed out of his Atlas Titan and started sprinting with Tarius and Sergeant Frost back to the courtyard.

"Sergeant, call for evac!"

"Already on it, sir!"

The minute Cortana had announced that there was a nuke, the battle for Kastella seemingly halted, as soldiers, Marines, N7, TDST, OATs, Rangers, all fled and called out to any Pegasus dropship that would ferry them away from the city.

"This is Lt. Velasquez, Pegasus, call sign 'Echo 310', is anyone down there?" They could hear the distinct sound of a Pegasus engines.

"Echo 310 this is Colonel Tyson Greyston, call sign Black Fist!" Tyson called out to the pilot. He and his fellow TDST hopped over several obstacles and ran alongside the wall and jumped towards the roof. In a stroke of pure luck, that's where the Pegasus just happening to hover over in its search. All three pilots jumped inside the cargo bay and closed it behind them. Inhaling a bit, Tyson turned around to see a sight he didn't expect: the Royal Family along with members of Fireteam ARCLIGHT.

"Oh, it's you guys," Tarius replied dully. He'd be lying if he said he still wasn't salty about ARCLIGHT and the Sangheili Ghosts running circles around his best pilots.

"Where's the rest of your platoon?" Julius asked, curiously. It wasn't like Greystone to lose men.

"Wasted," Greystone growled, not really in the mood. He slid down to the floor and took out the picture of Alyx and glanced at it. He felt like shit and honestly, she was the only reason he wasn't having a mental breakdown.

Julius nodded sympathetically. "I'm sorry." He turned to the pilot. "El-Tee, bring us back to the Dawn. The Kings will be safe there."

Following the order, Echo 310 revved up the engines and made its way outside of the atmosphere and into the void of space and joined Echo 210, which held Blue Team and the Kings themselves.

From the outside the Royal Family could only stare as the countdown on the clock reached zero. The first was the calm before the storm—then the flash, followed by a large boom. The nuclear effects were instant as a large EMP was let out leaving the entire city without power. The thirty-megaton explosion vibrated the earth. Edifices, schools, parks, etc, were vaporized in an instant and tens of millions were killed as the city was cracked in twain. The scorching heat caused Lake Veira, an internal lake inside the city about a quarter of the size of Lake Ontario, to evaporate and turn to hot steaming vapor. Any building left inside the gargantuan city that somehow remained would either collapse or be atomized to dust. The resulting mushroom cloud was large enough to be seen even from geosynchronous orbit.

Kastella, the once crown jewel and symbol of the Zestirian Pact, was no more.

For the invasion alone, the Pact and Alliance would swear vengeance, but the permanent scaring of Zestiria was simply unforgivable.

The Batarian Hegemony had made a mistake that it wouldn't live long

enough to regret.

In a flash of light, the Galaxy was going to change forever.

(END)

And that's a wrap! I know it seemed kind of rushed at the end, but believe me I've kept you guys waiting long enough so was like fuck it.

So, why did the Batarian Hegemony nuke a city they were trying to capture? Hmmâ€¦keep reading to find out!

Don't forget if you want to submit an OC you still can! I haven't made any decisions yet, and there's a little surprise for you all.

OC Submission Categories:

1)A partner for Alyxandria Shepard as she goes through the N7 Academy. This character can be male, female, drell, human, biotic, etc. Get creative! Give me a backstory of why they want to be N7, what type of combat they specialize in, weapons, etc. They MUST be same age as Shepard (15 or 16 years old, as I explained last chapter, I will explain why N7 is accepting teens in future chapters). If character is male DO NOT write the character with the intention of pairing the two off. I will personally decide what characters will get with Alyx. When in doubt, assume the partner will NOT get together romantically with Shepard.

2) An Ambassador for the URSC that's quick witted and knows how to negotiate the URSC's strength to the Citadel Council. This character CAN be human or drell. The previous rule of "drell only" is now officially void."

3)A xenophobic Asari Admiral, who has a distate for non-Citadel races. However, she is the Asari equivalent of Admiral Cole in combat. Explain why she's xenophobic and feats of her tactical brilliance

4)A URSC fighter pilot working on a top secret starfighter. If you want to submit details of the fighter you can. It's not necessary however. You CAN assume said pilot participated in the battle to liberate Zestiria IF you so choose.

5)A URSC Captain who gets the honor of commandeering the URSC Daedalus, an Infinity-class capital warship scheduled to finish completion in a few years.

6)Two Turian HUNTERS. I'll be very lenient with this. Get creative.

7) Subordinates of Jack Harper. His Right and Left hand men. Can be human or drell. Biotics preferably, but not necessary. I will choose two of these.

8) Human Xenobiologist.

That's all folks!

Codex:

M321C Rapid Reconnaissance Vehicle "Cheetah"- The Cheetah is the fastest land vehicle in the URSC capable of reaching speeds of 180 KPH for non-augmented soldiers. The hoverbike is controlled mainly by liquid state electronics which synchronize with the Heads-Up-Display of the rider and said rider can mentally call out targets and the system will follow through extraordinary accuracy.

Liquid State Electronics- Liquid State Electronics are specialized computer systems, used to specially protect advance computer systems from electromagnetic pulses. Liquid State Electronics are more expensive than regular, solid state electronics, but can transfer and store much more information and are unaffected by electronic state electronics consist of a nanite driven positronic core, similar to early generation A.I.s. These are connected by artificially generated matrices. All this is contained in a shielded liquid suspension, filled with shock absorbing kinetic protection systems and charged particle electromagnetic shielding, designed to sustain and protect it from impact and from electromagnetic effects

Orbital Assault Troopers-The cream-of-the-crop, these are the URSC's most skilled and deadly warriors outside of the OMEGA program. Considered walking tanks, they are given minor augmentations and drop behind enemy lines to wreak havoc on foes.

10. The Road to War

****Mass Effect: The New Journey ****

****Chapter Ten: **_The Road to War_**

Giving you guys a New Years present! Glad to see reception of this has been pretty decent and/or good. This is an intermission chapter till the Alliance, or should I say, URSC, starts their brutal retaliation.

Disclaimer: I make no claim of anything except my own work. Mass Effect, Halo, and Titanfall, are under the rights of Bioware, 343 Industries, and Respawn Entertainment, as well as the publishing rights of Electronic Arts, Microsoft Game Studios.

* * *

><p>Vixa System, November 4****th******, 2167

****Onboard Alliance Dreadnought, SSV ****_**Atlas **_****

Silence.

It was one of those acts that aboard a starship spoke volumes, saying nothing, yet always saying _everything_. Every single officer and enlisted personnel on the bridge of the most powerful dreadnought in the Alliance fleet could only stare in sheer horror as every single human and drell had their eyes practically glued to the main screen. The only sound in the entire bridge was the ships HVAC unit's fan keeping everything at room temperature.

Director Miles Andre Xavier's mouth was agape, his eyes only slightly widened, even with his dark chocolate skin, he look as if he had seen a ghost. He had been the leader of the Alliance, and by proxy, humanity, for the better part of almost two decades. Not since he learned that humanity's exponential progress had been from humans from a different galaxy had his mind came a complete and utter _halt_.

Kastella. It was the crown jewel and pride of the Zestirian Pact, and to a lesser extent, the Alliance. That was where he and the Kings signed the Interstellar Free Trade Agreement, saving the Alliance from a nearly disastrous recession that was brewing. Hundreds of millions of human tourists visited the city every year from then on, pumping trillions of credits in revenue alone. Along with that, the Pact had signed an alliance with humanity for military purposes for mutual benefit. That city was practically the symbol of humanity's optimism about first contact with other alien civilizations, and Xavier's legacy whenever he retired from being Director.

And nowâ€¦that city was in a pile of a radioactive ash. On the main holotable was a casualty estimateâ€¦and the number just kept mounting higher and higher, well into the nine-digit range, with no signs of stopping anytime soon. Not only did the attack kill millions of civilians, but a good chunk of the Alliance's liberation force for the city had perished as well. _Gone_ in the blink of an eye.

Once the initial shock had worn off, Xavier clenched his fists as he felt a rage he didn't think he was possible of feeling.

"Admiral Hackett," he intoned, his voice as cold as a glacier.

"â€¦Sir?" the Admiral replied, gulping a bit as he stared at his superior. Vice-Admiral Hackett was a man who could read men like books. It was how he was able to keep his subordinates in line and get them the help and therapy they needed when they needed it. What he saw in the Director's eyes terrified him to his core. _Something_ had fundamentally changed in the man, and only time would tell if that would be a good or bad thing.

"Has the last enemy dreadnought been disabled?"

"Yes, sir, we crippled the ship for boarding parties to leave at your order," Hackett replied professionally. By now, the battle for Vixa had been over, with over seven hundred Batarian ships destroyed. The Alliance had lost a few cruisers, a carrier, and a hundred or so frigates. The last capital ship was disabled instead of destroyed for more intelligence purposes.

"No. No boarders. I want you to hail them. There's something I wish to say."

"Iâ€¦" Hackett was a bit unsure, but swallowed his confusion. "Yes, sir." He turned to one of his sensor operators. "Ensign, would you do the honors?"

After a few seconds of tapping on the controls, a shot of the bridge of the Batarian dreadnought _To Punish and Enslave_ was on screen. Judging by the surprise of the crew, it was obvious the Director of

the Systems Alliance, and consequently the _single_ most powerful and influential human in the galaxy, was the last thing they expected.

The Batarian captain, in either arrogance or pure stupidity, glared at the dark-skinned man, who remained impassive. "What is it you want, human? For us to beg for mercy? Plead for you to spare our lives? To a bunch of vagrants? Never!" It was abundantly clear that the Batarian captain didn't make his rank on merit or skill, but by connections, unlike Esta Va'rek, who lead the invasion force.

The entire crew of the SSV _Atlas_ was stunned at the sheer lack of empathy and remorse.

Now, Xavier glared at the Batarian officer. "Mercy? You honestly expected me to give you an option of _mercy_ after what you _monsters_ just did?!" he roared in anger. "The Alliance has laws against using nuclear grade weaponry on planets with high civilian concentrations...but _you_—you just destroyed an entire city that grew over the course of a _thousand_ years of cooperation between the Draxians and Caleans whose coexistence wasn't always peaceful! Men, women, children, soldiers, comrades, brothers, sisters, aunts and uncles, family. All of them are now _gone_. Even now you have the audacity to act high-and-mighty as if you've been wronged?!"

"I didn't order any—" the Batarian captain _tried_ to lie, but he was interrupted.

"Stop," Xavier commanded, freezing the captain in his tracks, his eyes wide as a deer in headlights. "I hope you're proud of yourself, Captain, because you've just kicked the hornet's nest. For all of our faults, my people are known for their compassion and willingness to help out their neighbors even in the most trying of times, it's been documented well in our history, as we _welcomed_ the Sangheili practically with open arms, and then a century later, the Caleans and Draxians joined our small _**covenant**_ and we prospered." He took in a deep breath. "But, _now_? After they see what you've _monsters_ have done? My people will want blood. Blood for the tens, possibly hundreds, of millions you killed in your initial invasion. For the _hundreds of thousands_ you kidnapped to be enslaved, and for the tens of millions in Kastella that were wiped out just not even _ten minutes_ ago! I promise you this, Batarian. Your homeworld will _**BURN**_ and anything your species values has just been forfeited. We will unleash a force _ten_ times greater than what your military attacked here with."

Xavier could see the captain's eyes widened in rage and shook his head; clearly the alien was in denial, having spent too much time enjoying the fruits of the labor his government sanctioned. "You DARE threaten my species with war?!" Sadly, the irony of what he just said was lost on him.

Director Xavier gave him a dark chuckle. " You think I'm threatening your species with _**war**_? Fools, I'm _promising_ you _**outright annihilation**_. Be glad you won't be alive to witness as the full might of the Systems Alliance, the Zestirian Pact, and the Sangheili Empire bears down on your species. We will claim your homeworld, destroy your colonies, any outposts, _**everything**_, and we will free anyone and everyone you and the rest of your _bastard_ species has enslaved. May your gods have mercy upon your souls and the

billions of lives your actions just cost forâ€|we will not."

The hailed ended and Xavier nodded to Hackett. At the bow of the SSV Atlas, the Plasma Accelerator Canon revved up. They had a clear shot. Try as they might the Batarian crew could not get their ship out of the way and jump to FTL to fight another day. The canon fired. There was nothing left of the Slavers as the plasma engulfed the entire ship and atomized it to dust.

With that one ship destroyed. The battle for Zestiria, at least in space, was effectively over.

"Sir, we still have reports of Batarians fighting on the ground still," Hackett reported after handing him the tablet with the relevant data.

"My orders still stand. None of them gets off Zestiria alive," He replied coldly.

"As you wish," Hackett saluted and left the man to his own devices. He couldn't help but pity the man. To have your entire legacy gone in the blink of an eyeâ€|

He shuddered before walking off the bridge.

"Directorâ€|I have gotten some interesting news," said the Atlas' A.I., Matias, as he materialized. He had chosen the appearance of a United States Supreme Court Justice as his avatar.

"What is it, Matias?" Xavier drawled tiredly. Clearly the man wasn't in the mood.

"While you were talking to our resident Batarian Captain, I was doing some snooping around in their systems. I have everything, sir." There was a proud smirk.

"Everything?" The black man had an eyebrow raised.

"Galaxy Maps, galactic encyclopedias, translators, star charts, military outposts, everything we need to launch our counterattack."

"Damn good work, Matias! Initiate ENDWAR and pass this along back to High Admirals and Fleet Admiral Ashdown. We'll be able to discuss our strategy in the upcoming weeks."

"Already done. But sir, there's also something you should know."

"What's that?"

"We're not the only players in the galaxyâ€|"

* * *

><p>Arcturus Station, Medical Bay, Room 42

Three Weeks Later, November 21**st****, 2167 **

"All right, Colonel, everything seems to be clear. You're good to go

from where I'm standing," the female military doctor, a drell, informed Tyson with a smile. Drell who chose to become physicians were valued greatly, their eidetic memories allowing them to treat human and alien patients with the utmost of ease, remembering the finer details.

"Thanks, doc. I really appreciate it," Tyson replied gratefully.

She waved him off. "It's no problem, sir. Just doing my job. I do have to say though, you Titan Drop Shock Troopers are some seriously tough bastards," she complemented, which Tyson nodded a bit absentmindedly. She then asked, "What happened on Zestiria?"

He gave her a whimsical smile, even if she did see the traces of melancholy and desolation behind his chocolate brown eyes. "Doc, you know I can't answer that—at least not right now." After the nuke went off, destroying Kastella, the Alliance had placed the entire Vixa system on complete lockdown and an Emergency Directive media blackout. No one got in or out without the order of the Director himself. Other than Tarius, Sgt. Frost, and the OMEGA super soldiers, virtually every ship and soldier that arrived to liberate Zestiria was still there. Were it not for the Colonel's dumb luck of happening to hitch a ride on a Pegasus with the Royal Family—and a word from the Kings of Zestiria themselves to allow them to stay—he would've likely been ordered to stay as a clean up crew. For three weeks, the entire Alliance had hunted every single Batarian soldier stranded on the Pact's home planet. They took no prisoners. After three weeks of silence from the Vixa, the entire planet was now liberated from slavers. Just in time, as well. All over Alliance space, to include Earth, Axiom Prime, Eden Prime, Taurus-4, Titan-6, Freedom's Progress, Esoteria, were protests demanding the government release information on what the hell happened at Zestiria.

For that reason, Director Xavier had scheduled a press conference for today, three hours from now, noon, in the Arcturus' Parliament chambers, along with hundreds of members of the press. Analysts had already calculated that it would likely be the most watched news conference in human history, with even businesses across Alliance space making time out of their schedules to let their employees tune in, either from a computer or television. In a few hours, nearly 90 billion Alliance citizens would learn of a terrible truth.

The doctor sighed, knowing he was right. "Well, can't blame a girl for trying." Her watch beeped indicating she had another patient to attend to. She perked up in surprise. "Oh, excuse me! I have to go. Glad you're feeling better, Colonel. I'll come and check up on you again in a few hours so I can release you." Waving him goodbye, she hurried out of the room, eager to attend to her patient.

Tyson shook his head and laid back down on his pillow.

"Feeling better, Ty?"

Tyson huffed amused. "Yeah, I guess you could say that Tarius, you lucky bastard." Of course he would get off that hellhole with barely a scratch on him.

Tarius grinned and sat on a chair beside him. "This is nothing but grade-A badass. Don't hate."

"Wasn't trying too," he told him looking up at the ceiling. He turned to him, his face serious. "You knowâ€¦.after this warâ€¦I'm retiring," the Colonel declared suddenly.

The drell blinked, not even bothering trying to contain his surprise. "Whoaâ€¦" He honestly didn't know how to react.

"Yeahâ€¦" the Colonel twiddled his thumbs, a habit he had picked up as a teenager. "I'm justâ€¦tiredâ€¦we lost some good men, Tarius. I just don't know how much longer I can take itâ€¦"

"Don't blame yourself, Tyson. That wasn't your fault."

"Yeah, that's what I tell myself every night I try to sleep. These four eyed freaksâ€¦." He growled as vengeance swelled up from within him. "They're going to payâ€¦one last drop, for every soldier under my command they killed." It wasn't like him to take war so personally, as he never even hated the rebels, as he simply had a job, but the Batarians had rubbed him the wrong way. Slavery? In the 22nd century?! To top it off, they actually had the gall to _nuke_ the capital city of the homeworld of one of humanity's allies? To say the Batarians had dug a giant grave on their home planet would probably be the mellowest form of an understatement possible.

Tarius nodded. "I agree. I'm dropping with you one last time then as well."

Tyson looked surprised. "What? You're retiring too?"

"Yeah. They'd probably put me under some asshole I really don't like," he half-joked. "That's a disaster just waiting to happen. You know me. I'm not going to take shit from some wet behind the ears El-Tee who thinks he's hot shit because he graduated top of his class at Luna Academy and Axiom Prime's Drop School, hell probably not even a Captain, either. Command probably would discharge me for insubordination," he chuckled, half-serious.

Tyson rolled his eyes. "Like they would do anything to you. You're a Sergeant Major and you have a shit ton of experience." The Colonel then smirked. "But I find it cute that you'd miss me too much."

"Shut up!" Both of them shared a good laugh, before both stared out into space, using the view port near Tyson's hospital bed. Arcturus was the capital of the Systems Alliance, and as such it had the First Fleet, lead by the Sangheili Empire's Flagship, the _Steeple of Ascent_. In the century since the Arbiter and his people had settled on New Sanghelios, a planet roughly ten light years from Earth, the Empire had protected the Alliance's key assets in its inner territory, including shipyards, mining colonies, and Arcturus itself. In fact, Sangheili ships modeled after the Covenant outnumbered "UNSC" type ships in the First Fleet by a ratio of 2-to-1. To add to this protection, Arcturus' hull was made out of Titanium-A3 with triple layer energy shielding and had ten heavy deck guns scattered across the outer shell that could easily replicate the effects of an Orbital Defense Platform, as well as literally _thousands_ of Jericho missile batteries. If, by some miracle, the station was attacked from the inside, by either rebel infiltrators or a future alien faction, an entire division of Marines, a company of Orbital Assault Troopers, and the thousands of military and civilian police officers would be

able to repel any serious attempt to take the capital. It wasn't anywhere _close_ to as being as heavily defended as Axiom Prime"and Earth to a _certain_ extent"but _any_ enemy knew; trying to take Arcturus was a fool's endeavor.

Tyson and Tarius watched in silence, as dozens of slipspace portals seem to open and close around the clock, minute-by-minute. They were civilian vessels. Obviously, any member of press wanted to capture Xavier's announcement live as the talking heads were already making speculations of what it could be. Some ranged dangerously close to the truth, to the pitifully absurd.

"Three hours, Tyson," Tarius declared looking at him. "Three hours and everything changes." Tyson nodded, agreeing with his drell friend.

"To think"we went a _century_ and some change in an era of peace and prosperity. Every species we met on the galactic stage treated us with peace and we the same" he growled. "Talk about a new reality check."

Tarius was going to reply, but he was cut off as he heard a shriek of bliss.

"Dad!"

Tyson turned sharply before a thirteen-year-old teenager tackled him in an embrace, holding on tight, burying her head into his muscular chest.

"Alyx?" Tyson could barely hide his shock and surprise.

The young Shepard turned her head up to look at her father with bright cerulean blue eyes she had inherited from her mother. She was dressed in typical teenage garb, jeans, a black shirt, and a matching hoodie. Her pitch-black hair was straight, falling to her shoulders, not the long curly he remembered when they went to the park a month ago. She gave him a grin.

"What, surprised to see me, dad?" she playfully teased him. Just hearing her call him that warmed the TDST pilot's heart. Barely a month ago, he was unaware of her existence, and she him, yet it was almost as if it didn't matter. She had a father"her _real_ father"and she was going to let the entire _galaxy_ know it if need be without the slightest hesitation. _'Just how sheltered did you keep her, Hannah?'_ he thought to himself, inwardly frowning, before smiling back at her.

"I"well".yeah, I am. How did you" The answer came to him almost immediately.

"Tarius," both he and Alyx uttered simultaneously.

"Jynx!" the junior Shepard called out. "You owe me some credits dad."

"Do I? I didn't know teenagers still played that game," he teased at her smirking.

Alyx still kept her grin. "So? I'm thirteen, broke, and I have no

job. I'll take what I can get."

He playfully slapped her upside the head. "Smartass."

"She gets it from you, Tyson," Hannah declared, making her presence known. She was in her Alliance dress blues, only for the sole purpose of pulling rank and getting Alyx to see her father. She was becoming attached to the TDST pilot and Hannah was going to give her every opportunity to spend time with him.

"Oh, the great Captain Shepard finally graces us with her presence," Tarius mocked bowed. She rolled her eyes at the drell and sat on the bed. Currently, Alyx was Tyson's left, and her mother on his right.

"How you feeling?" she inquired tenderly, putting her hand on his and interlocking them. Tyson felt his heart rate rise. Even in her mid-forties, Hannah Shepard was still the stunning woman she was when they met fourteen years ago.

"Better, now that you two are here," he replied sincerely. Hannah gave him a smile and gently him a peck on the lips, much to their daughter's disgust.

"Momâ€¦Dadâ€¦.gross," Alyx huffed, gagging. Both of them shared a laugh at their daughter's discomfort.

"Don't worry sweetie, you'll get there someday," Hannah told her knowingly.

Alyx didn't reply, but looked at her father seriously. "Dadâ€¦what's going to happen? Are you going away for awhile?"

Tyson looked at Tarius who looked around and nodded. He nodded back. He couldn't lie to his family. Not now, not ever. To preserve Xavier's orders and to keep himself from lying, he kept it vague. "I amâ€¦for how long I don't know. Everything has changedâ€¦and I'm not sure when it will end."

Hannah frowned. "Just what's going on, Tyson?"

"Put it this way: In the next few hours, don't be surprised if the SUMMER Contingency is declared."

Hannah's eyes nearly bolted out of her eyes in shock as she covered her mouth. "Butâ€¦that's only called forâ€¦!"

"DEFCON Zero," Tyson interrupted. Taking a page from the United States Military of old, the Systems Alliance went by various states of readiness, DEFCON, ranging from 5-Peaceful and lâ€"State of War. However, there existed an even bigger stage: DEFCON Zero: which was the mobilization of every single military asset for an invasion of a system of an alien territory. The difference between DECON One and Zero was that one was reactionary and mainly defensive, preparing all forces for imminent attack, Zero was a state of total war where the Alliance took initiative and would strike the enemy with extreme prejudice before the **Big Five** (Earth, Arcturus, Axiom Prime, New Sanghelios, Eden Prime) could be attacked. For nearly a century, the Alliance was always at DEFCON Four, sometimes at 3 during the months of heavy pirate and rebel activity. Going to DEFCON 1 was

nearly inconceivable, let alone Zero.

"That bad?" Hannah could barely believe it herself.

"Hannahâ€¦if you saw the things I did on Zestiriaâ€¦I wouldn't be surprised if you retired tomorrow andâ€¦"

"I don't want you to go!" Alyx hugged her father, cutting him off. "Why can't you stay? With us? With me?" she cried out. It was of no surprise. Hannah didn't trust her so called "family" as far as she could throw them, and as such Alyx traveled with her from post-to-post, ship-to-ship, and station-to-station. With all the frequent moves her daughter rarely had time to make lasting friendships and was more introverted, even though her mother had observed tremendous leadership potential in her daughter after witnessing her play a game of laser tag on Eden Prime's most prestigious Game Center. She was rallying strangers to complete their objective in a quick and efficient manner. Even still, Alyx seemed uninterested in a military careerâ€¦at least, as of now.

"I know, I know, I do too," he admitted. "I will try to spend as much time with you as I can. Once it's over and I come back. We can do whatever we want. That sound good to you?"

She wiped her tears and sniffed. "Yeah, it sounds perfect."

"So, we got hours to kill. Why don't you tell me about that Academyâ€¦."

And so, Alyxandria Shepard began sharing every single detail of her life to the Colonel, who listened intently, with her having his undivided attention. In a few hours life in the Systems Alliance would change forever, but in that few hours, Tyson Lamont Greystone never felt more at peace and content.

* * *

><p>Arcturus Station, Quarters of Miles Andre Xavier

November 21**st****, 2167**

Miles Andre Xavier wiped off a bit of sweat as he laid down on his bed, his naked body full of sweat.

"Goddamn," he heard a voice say, distinctly female. "I know you're a good lay, Miles, but goddamn. You really do know how to please a woman. No wonder you keep me in line."

Xavier allowed himself a small smirk before tuning over to see Admiral Sayuri Ishigami, naked as the day she was born, all of her curves and bare breasts in plain sights. Had Xavier not already spent himself, he knew he would've continued, but alas, they were pressed for time.

"Yeah, guess I do, don't I?"

Admiral Ishigami took a cigarette, lit it, and inhaled a puff. "You knowâ€¦don't you have a speech to prepare for? Don't get me wrong, I love screwing you as much as the next woman, but this is kind of the

most important announcement of your career."

"Don't remind me," Xavier groaned as he put on a pair of boxers and sat on the bed. He closed his eyes. "I'm going to declare the SUMMER Contingency you know?" He didn't see the smirk on Ishigami's face. _'Good, exactly as I predicted and planned.'_

"I figured as much. We're taking the fight directly to them so it's only natural. I've already had the liberty of setting up a War Summit. I've invited Admiral Lasky and the Arbiter."

"I appreciate the initiative," Xavier told her as he walked towards his private bathroom. Not even ten minutes later, did the Director walk back inside freshly clean and shaven.

Ishigami whistled appreciatively taking in his muscular physique. Clearly the man did more for himself than just sign documents, and relay orders from light years away. She still hadn't bothered to put any _panties_ on, let alone her uniform. "Damn, Miles. Making me want you all over again."

"Shut up, Sayuri," Xavier rolled his eyes, as he got dressed in his director's garb. Ishigami smirked again. Xavier was probably the _only_ person in the Alliance who had the sheer _balls_ to tell her, of all people, to shut up _outright_. As ruthless as she was, the power dynamics of her _technically_ unprofessional relationship with the Director intoxicated her, as he exuded confidence and was held no _true_ fear of her, a fact that turned her on to ludicrous degrees.

"Listen," the leader of the Office of Alliance Intelligence suddenly said, seriously. "I don't know what you're feeling right now or what kind of turmoil you're going through, but you need to shake it off. I _know_ you, Miles. Whatever it is, it's done. The Alliance needs you to lead us to victory against these four-eyed aliens who dared to attack our own. They've dug a grave the size of a nebula." Of course, she left out the part where she and Harper's people were largely the reason the Batarians even _knew_ where Zestiria was, but that was a secret she, and the rest of the crew of the _Start of Darkness_, would take to her grave.

He scoffed a bit amused. "Glad you believe in me."

"I do," she told him. That time she was honest. She wasn't sure if she was in love or was even _capable of __such an emotion_, but if there were _any_ such man, Miles would be at the top of the list, winning in a landslide

A pair of N7 agents walked inside the room, unceremoniously. "Director, it's time, sir," they informed him. The two elite ninja-like soldiers didn't even bat an eyelash at seeing the Japanese Intelligence Flag Officer, being naked in front of them and judging from her expression, she didn't care either. It was practically common knowledge amongst the Special Forces operatives assigned to protect Xavier at any cost, much like the Secret Service and JFK two hundred years prior. It was none of their business and they were smart enough to not speak of what went on between the two.

"I'm aware, thank you." They both saluted and walked out the same way they came in.

Xavier was about to cross the threshold before something compelled him to ask his pseudo-girlfriend a question that had plagued his mind for years on end, yet never had the courage to ask, at least till now. "Tell me something, Sayuri." He turned around to face her. She raised both eyebrows, indicating for him to continue. "You know the one thing I never understood about you? How do you make killing someone or something soundâ€¦so _easy_?"

Sayuri Ishigami gave him a cold smile. She glanced left toward a replica of Michelangelo's "_Creation of Adam_" painting, which hung on Xavier's wall along with other paintings from the Italian Renaissance era. "God Himself doesn't discriminateâ€¦I guess he made me in His own image," she coldly replied.

Xavier felt a chill go down his spine and for the first time ever, he felt something he never thought he would from Ishigami: _fear_.

He walked out not even a second later, trying to clear his head for what he was about to do.

* * *

><p>Arcturus Parliament Chambers

November 21st, 2167

The Parliament Chambers inside Arcturus was truly enormous, at roughly 1 kilometer in diameter and 500 meters tall in a dome shape. This was where the roughly 500 legislators with representation from ALL of the colonies debated various laws and regulations, alongside dozens of A.I. helpers, where, after a law was passed with majority vote, it was sent to Director Xavier to sign into law. He, as Director, had discretionary clauses in the Systems Alliance Charter to enforce any laws passed by Parliament as how he saw fitâ€¦within reason, of course. There was little worry from the Legislators about Xavier, as the man enjoyed high approval ratings, from both military and civilian personnel for one simple reason: he didn't try to horde power like a power hungry despot and made conscious efforts to reduce corruption whenever he could and tried to make the Alliance Government as transparent as he could (ARCHON and OMEGA, non-withstanding). Just five years ago, the Deputy Director of the Systems Allianceâ€¦"essentially the Second-Most Powerful person in Alliance Spaceâ€¦" was charged with embezzling funds in various front corporations. Once the evidence was found and gone over, he was dismissed without a second thought and thrown in prison. It had sent a message: it didn't matter _who_ you were, if you were corrupt, broke the law, and were dumb enough to get caught, you were going down.

Seated were all five hundred members of Parliament, several thousand members of the press, and even more civilians. Every species was present: Human, Drell, Sangheili, Huragok, Unggoy, Calean, and Draxian. It was clear by the confused murmurs that even the Calean and Draxian civilians had no idea what was going on, as they had been visiting Alliance colonies and the _few_ Pact colonies before Zestiria was invaded. So, it seemed that Xavier's lockdown order had some multitude of success.

Inside the crowd were a good number of disguised N7 agents and

Sangheili Spec Ops on the roof cloaked with Active Camouflage and beam rifles, ready to take down any and all threats to the Director's Life.

As for the Director himself, he was behind a curtain, backstage mentally preparing himself for what he was about to do. He looked at his watch: 11:59 P.M. One minute. In one minute everything would change and if he was perfectly honest, he wasn't sure when it was going to end. His people would demand vengeance, retribution, and everything in between. Because that's what humanity was: striving for peace, but could declare war and carry it out with ferocity that other species couldn't dream of.

12:00 P.M.

Always wanting to keep his reputation of being punctual, Xavier swallowed his anxiety and put on the face of confidence that others looked up too. He walked out.

"Ladies and Gentlemen, the Director of the Systems Alliance!" Everyone present stood up, immediately, and those in the military stood at attention. Xavier swaggered out with raw confidence and waved silently at the dozens of cameras broadcasting an FTL signal throughout Alliance space. He was being watched by, literally, tens of billions of sapient beings. Unknown to everyone, he was flanked by two Sangheili Spec Ops soldiers, who, like their comrades on the roof, were cloaked by active camouflage. They were completely unnoticed, not by any civilians, nor any viewers at home, naturally.

"Everyone please take your seats," he soothingly called out, a command, which was followed immediately, while the veterans, opted for parade rest.

He inhaled and decided to go for it. "My people, fellow citizens of the Systems Alliance—I thank you all for coming here on short notice," Xavier began, while he saw some in the audience simply nod along. "There are rumors circulating on the extranet about a terrible tragedy that has taken place. I'm here to confirm that they are indeed true." Multiple murmurs spread throughout the crowd, but they died down soon as Xavier began speaking. "Some of you have noticed that your friends, colleagues, family and anything in between were called for an immediate deployment, of which their destination was classified to the highest order. Though I'm sure you all have put it together by now, I'm here to confirm it: Zestiria, the Homeworld of our Draxian and Caelean allies—was invaded by a hostile alien civilization who call themselves the Batarian Hegemony." A holographic representation appeared beside him, showing your average run-of-the-mil Batarian soldier.

There was complete and utter silence as every single person in the room went wide eyed in disbelief and some even shook their head in denial. He couldn't blame them. For over a century, humanity had good relations with aliens, with the arrival of the Sangheili in 2054, then the drell forty years later, and finally the Zestirian Pact, not even a decade ago. Three contacts had all ended peacefully had created a sense of naivety among the populace, even with Humanity's ever growing military power. Now, Xavier had shattered that notion with a single proclamation.

"We were able to repel the invaders for three standard days of fighting, both in the void and on the ground. We knew their objective: Slaves." There. Another bomb dropped. "We don't know how, but they learned of the Zestirian homeworld and were able to bypass their early detection systems and invaded the planet en-masse. They destroyed everything in their path and captured anyone who didn't resist, and killed the rest. Even now, we have no idea how many they took back to their homeworld. But our closest estimate is in the low seven-digit range."

That brought out hundreds of questions from reporters and angry Caelean civilians. They had to be restrained in the off chance one of them got a bit too crazy.

"Please calm yourselves and I'll answer your questions!" They did, if a bit reluctantly. This was one of those times where he was glad journalism culture as a whole had changed from the _embarrassment_ it was in the early 21st century. They had remarkable discipline when they were ordered. There were still a few knuckleheads, but they were easy enough to deal with seeing as how they were a minority. However, he had his doubts the beings watching right now were calm, though.

"Director, sir," a drell journalist stood up. "What's the status of the planet? Are we going to retaliate? What's our next move?"

Xavier resisted the urge to smirk. He asked all the questions he was going to answer and nothing more. "The planet is stable and we have the Kings secured in a classified location...however, we still have a series of teams cleaning up the fallout" he spoke softly and solemnly.

"Fallout?" the reporter retorted, confused. "Sir, are you saying, that?"

Xavier looked toward the ceiling. "Matias, if you will?" he asked his personal A.I politely. The room went dark, but the lightning on the stage was still visible. The projector in the room showed Kastella post-invasion. Gasps of horror filled the room. The entire city was a pile of radioactive ash, with very few buildings still standing. It was going to take years to repair the city with the invasion, with the nuke; it was going to take decades, if not centuries in the worst-case scenario!

The lights went back on and Xavier could practically feel the bloodlust coursing through the crowd, not that he could blame them in the slightest. "For hundreds of years and our laws have made it clear: slavery of _any_ kind is not acceptable and those who are found guilty of this crime against Sapient kind, they will be punished to the highest extent of the law. We have estimates now that including those who were killed in the initial invasion, our fellow service members bravely giving the ultimate sacrifice in its liberation, and the millions obliterated in a flash of light now tops five-hundred million and that number keeps climbing as we find more corpses. Make no mistake; _this is a declaration of war against us_. The Batarians are arrogant and they think of slavery as part of their culture and can take from us what we hold dear at any time they wish. They made the mistake of attacking a race we call friends. An attack on the Pact is an attack on all of us! We will rescue our own, claim their territories, colonies, trade outposts, and much more and we

will burn Khar'shan to the ground!"

Everyone stood up and clapped at the declaration, having the full support of the Alliance.

"As of now, I have talked with the Kings for three weeks, now and they have agreed: The Zestirian Pact has given their full consent to integrate fully with the Systems Alliance, with a vote decided on by the Alliance Parliament and the signing of the charter by the Director of the Systems Alliance. The motion has been put forth!"

On the tablets of all members of Parliament were three options: Yes, No, and Abstain. Although they were caught off guard, not expecting to vote on any legislation, they nearly tripped over themselves to vote in favor, hoping to use it to further their political agendas. Xavier got his answer: it was unanimous, without a single no vote.

The law appeared on the podium's digital monitor, as the charter was already drafted years ago, the ball was simply in the Kings' court to approve. Xavier signed it quickly enough with his own personal electronic pen that was coded to his genetic code. "As of this moment, 21st November in the Year of Our Lord 2167, I hereby declare the Systems Alliance military **dissolved** and its place, the United Races Space Command, headed by the Unified Species Government (USG), and all Alliance Laws in accordance to the Unified Species Charter, Article X, Paragraph 1, subsection D, will formally carry over under the new government with no apparent changes unless debated by the USG Parliament for a formal drafting for further refining. So mote it be!"

Even with the high tension and declaration of war, there were still cheers at the tremendous achievement.

"My first act as Director of the URSC is to ask the members of Parliament to formally declare a state of war between the USG and the Batarian Hegemony." As with the URSC charter, the vote was unanimous. Even the most pacified lawmaker knew voting no was committing political suicide.

Xavier nodded and then went for the big announcement. "I, Miles Andre Xavier, Director of the USG and Commander-in-Chief of the URSC Armed Forces, hereby declare URSC Emergency Directive XX-945-517."

While the majority of the civilians and a good bit of members of Parliament were confused, every single veteran of the former Alliance military instantly knew what was at stake and the sheer gravity of the situation.

"As of now, **ALL** of USG space is hereby placed under the SUMMER Contingency! This order supersedes all previous orders and all URSC military personnel are to report to their home station for further orders, as well as all reserve personnel, we are calling you to arms as well to remain on high alert." His order was being relayed light years from Arcturus to Eden Prime to Axiom Prime to Taurus-4, and even Earth itself. Within the next 72 Standard USG hours, approximately 1.8 **billion** troops both active duty and reserve would be armed to the teeth as they prepared for the largest counterattack in any species history. Now, obviously, all 1.8 billion wouldn't participate in the invasion, but this was a state of

emergency and a temporary war economy would be in the process of converting factories all over URSC's territory would be converted to a war machine on a galactic scale.

"As I speak now, I'm ordering for all Zestirian ships and troopers to be given upgrades and crash course basic training in using our equipment to the fullest extent of their potential! The Batarians believe they are a superior race and we will show them just how wrong they are! We will NEVER bow to any aggressors and we will stand against the mightiest of foes and we send a message to the entire galaxy!"

The lights went out suddenly and the alarms on the station began to blare. It was the SUMMER Contingency's alarm: the URSC's defense condition went from four straight to Zero.

"Good luck, and God Speed ladies and gentlemen!"

* * *

><p>URSC Infinity, en-route to Axiom Prime, War Summit**

**November 26th, 2167 **

"And you're sure of this?" Admiral Lasky asked once again, pinching the bridge of his nose in complete frustration.

"While I can't confirm it with absolute certainty, sir," Cortana replied, as her hologram was on Lasky's desk inside his personal office. "The Zestirian Kings likely knows who John is."

"And you have no evidence other than just a feeling? No files? Nothing in their records? Computer systems?"

"Iâ€|" Cortana was flustered for a microsecond, and then recovered quickly enough. "No," she admitted. "They keep all of their secrets on physical paper. Whatever they knew died when Kastella was destroyed. "

Admiral Lasky frowned and shook his head, obviously disappointed. "Then I'm afraid I'm sorry, Cortana, Chief, I can't do much of anything. Not without hard proof. The risk is too great andâ€|"

"But, Admiralâ€|"!

"Let. Me. Finish," Lasky growled out, silencing the A.I. "We're already on thin ice as it is. Director Xavier had to move mountains so we could repair Infinity away from URSC engineers and maintenance crews. We still have irreplaceable equipment on this ship that would make it abundantly clear we aren't from here. So, my answer is a resounding no, until you get hard evidence that's irrefutable."

The Master Chief stared at the UNSC-turned-URSC Admiral. "Sirâ€|over a hundred years agoâ€|you were willing to take a chance with the Didactâ€|why not now?"

"Because we had clear evidence of the Didact, Chief. Del Rio simply

ignored it because he was an idiot and a coward to boot," Lasky instantly replied, already expecting that question. He held no love or respect for his former superior. Why HIGHCOM had given him command of _Infinity_ was a question he asked himself a number of times. "If you think I'm a hypocrite, be my guest. But I still have the lives of our crew to think about. You have your orders. Get me clear evidence of what I need and I'll back you 100 percent, no questions asked. You know that. But until such time, you both are to remain an asset to the URSC."

"â€|I understand, sir." Even Lasky could detect the Chief's disappointment.

Lasky pinched the bridge of his nose, he was probably going to regret what he was about to order next, but he had to leave some sort of wiggle room. "But, as a compromise, if you do find overwhelming evidence to what you need and I'm unavailable...wellâ€|I'm giving you my full permission to execute your best judgment Master Chief."

John looked back at him, surprised. "â€|sir?" unsure if he had heard that correctly.

"Don't abuse that order, Chief," Lasky told him seriously. "I have enough problems already. Just so we're clear, you two gathering intelligence is a _secondary_, if not an outright _tertiary_ concern and your primary mission comes first. Am I clear?"

"Crystal, sir!" Cortana smiled, giving him a proper salute.

"All right then, I have a War Summit to attend. Dismissed!"

John saluted and Cortana returned to his suit. Walking out, John couldn't help but smile, if only slightly.

It wasn't every day that your superior officer listened to reason, even if it was, technically, a compromise.

He banished those thoughts ahead and focused on his next mission: taking down the Batarian Hegemony.

Timeline

_November 26__th_, 2167- Director Xavier meets with the URSC's top military officials, along with the Arbiter and Sangheili Fleet Masters and Field Marshals. The URSC devises a counter attack plan that would involve the deployment of 100 million URSC soldiers across all Batarian Colonies to include the Batarian Homeworld, Khar'shan. Draxians and Caleans, are given upgrades to their armour to include energy shielding and basic training in URSC tactics, strategy and doctrine. Fueled by the desire of revenge against their homeworld's scarring, both inducted species pick up their skills relatively quickly. The URSC counter attack is code-named: OPERATION FIRESTORM. Director Xavier holds the existence of the Citadel Council from the public, but senior military officials are made aware of its existence. _

_December 11__th_, 2167: The Office of Strategic Intelligence, the successor to OAI, covertly scouts out Batarian Systems, from navigation data captured by the A.I Matias. The Batarians are seemingly preparing for war as thousands of ships are patrolling the

Batarian homeworld. Despite this clear build up, Xavier decides to wait, instead of attacking prematurely, as not all upgrades and repairs are done for Pact ships. _

_December 12__th__, 2167: The Kings of Zestiria officially retire, but it's clear they still have enormous influence among their species. LNOS, as per an agreement, will be open to the URSC's most trusted members when the Batarian War is over. _

_December 25__th__, 2167: Christmas Day, the URSC's war machine is in full throttle and with the help of the Huragok, hundreds of Pact ships are being given a spit-shine and various other upgrades to comply with URSC naval regulations. Pact officers are given crash course knowledge of space warfare with the new weapons. _

_January 4__th__, 2168: Colonel Tyson Lamont Greystone is assigned a new division aboard the URSC _John. F Kennedy_, a carrier in the URSC Third Fleet. Hannah Shepard is promoted to Rear Admiral and assigned to the dreadnought, _Beautiful Annihilation_, and will lead a task force to the Batarian colony, Adek. _

_January 18__th__, 2168: The Pact is fully upgraded after hundreds of hours of labor from the URSC's brightest engineers and Huragok.

_

_February 1__st__, 2168: Final preparations are still underway as the URSC goes over final logistics of the counter-attack. Over 15,000 ships are involved. The attack is set a week after Valentines Day.

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* * *

><p>February 2***nd****, 2168**

**Kronos System, Top Secret Shipyard, 3 parsecs from ARCHON
**

"Exciting slip space in 3€|.2€|1," the technician aboard URSC Amaterasu called out, as the flagship of Admiral Ishigami exited slip space.

"Excellent. Well done, Lieutenant. On course and on-time," she praised the technician who sported a blush and he nodded to her in clear gratitude.

"Now, will you tell me what's going, Admiral? I don't like my time wasted," a drell spoke as he dusted himself off. The reptilian humanoid alien was wearing a black dress suit that was clearly in the four-digit range in terms of cost.

Ishigami smirked a bit. Shi Abu was no ordinary drell, that was for sure.

Looks like she found another person, who had the sheer balls to stand up to her: she liked him already. "Oh, Ambassador Abu, please, calm yourself. I promise it'll be worth your while."

"_Worth my while?!_ Admiral, I've been stuck inside Arcturus prepping myself for our eventual contact with this so called Citadel Council and you suddenly just whisk me away to go God knows where in the

middle of the galaxy?"

"It relates to your work. Trust me," Ishigami replied neutrally, unbeturbed by the ambassador's small rant. "You use to work in Intelligence. Not under me, of course, but you should know I wouldn't show you this if there wasn't a reason."

"I suppose so," he huffed, but calmed down. "Now, what is it?"

Ishigami turned to another OSI agent. "Commander, turn on the observation deck. Full 360 degrees."

"At once, Admiral." Tapping a few icons on his monitor, all around the bridge various monitors seemed to "connect" to each other to show an entire cohesive image with the _Amaterasu's_ ultra-high definition camera feeds, giving a view of space so realistic that it was literally almost like looking out a window. Ambassador Abu was certainly impressed, even a bit awed. He had joined the URSC military at the age of 19, long before the then-Alliance, had made contact with the Pact. Space had fascinated him as a child growing up on Earth in London and now, at the age of 35, he still felt admiration.

"You're tasked with selling our strength, no?" Ishigami declared rhetorically and then pointed left. "That's what of which that you'll be using when the time comes."

Abu looked towards where the Admiral pointed and he blinked his eyes in recognition. "Waitâ€¦|what's the _Infinity_, doing here?"

Ishigami along with her crew, actually snickered in amusement. "That's not the Infinity, Abu. That is the URSC _Daedalus_."

"Wait a minute. You just commissioned Infinity a little over ten years ago and you've _already_ begun creating _another_ Infinity-class warship?" There were hundreds of workers working to complete the entire superstructure of the Daedalus, along with the Huragok. The large capital ship already looked practically done!

"An astute observation," Ishigami dully noted, before getting serious. "This will be one of the two you'll use to leverage our power when the time comes."

"One of two? I don't seeâ€¦|.anotherâ€¦|.shipâ€¦|" Shi Abu trailed off as he dropped everything he was holding and his jaw went completely to the floor as Amaterasu sailed through the void around a satellite. Adjacent to the Daedalusâ€¦|was an absolutely _enormous_ ship being constructed as well. It was essentially the same design as the Infinity-class warship except on an even larger scale, much like the Covenant Assault Carrier and Covenant Supercarrier.

"_URSC Olympus_. Currently the largest ship in our fleet. Supercarrier-class."

"Ishigamiâ€¦|my godâ€¦|just how big IS that fucking thing? The _engines_ are the size of the bloody Daedalus itself!"

"21 kilometers, as per the original blueprints. When all is said and done, that ship won't just lead fleets, it will BE a fleet."

"Is this necessary? I meanâ€¦good lordâ€¦_21 kilometers_â€¦I can't imagine how much this thing costsâ€¦"

"Yes," Ishigami said resolutely and then looked at the _Olympus_.
"She'll be alone for a good while, though."

Abu raised the drell equivalent of an eyebrow. "How do you mean?"

"You're right. It IS expensive and we still have to plan our budget out, even with A.I. we can't just pull money out of our asses," she told him bluntly. "As such, Olympus will be the **only** supercarrier in the URSC for a minimum of 50 years. Not even the SUMMER Contingency can override that order."

"Military officials who don't want to waste more tax payer money than necessary, color me shocked," Abu sardonically sneered. "So, I know there has to be more to this than showing me these ships."

"You're a clever drell, Ambassador," Ishigami smirked again. "You're right. The Daedalus will be finished soon. Possibly within the next six months. It's ahead of schedule thanks to the extra funds from Director Xavier calling the SUMMER contingency. We'll need a Captain for it. I'm leaving that to your discretion."

"Is that so?" he dully retorted. "Why me? Aren't you more qualified?"

"Of course I am," she sneered in indignation. "Butâ€¦I have a bit of a bias towards Intelligence Officers. A small bias, but one that's there nonetheless."

"A conflict of interest," Abu deduced.

"Exactly," she confirmed. A hard light hologram appeared in front of her and she pressed some icons. "I've already sent a list to your Tablet."

Abu nodded and sat down, briefly sharing a glance at the names he was seeing: Alexandra O'Halloran, Dorian Sejanus, Migel Madden, Paige Dyer, Isaac Lowe, among others. He blinked. "What the hell? How do you expect me to choose?! Some of these Captains are household names within the entire military!"

Admiral Ishigami just gave him a knowing cold smile, but chose not to retort. The Ambassador growled, but looked over the documents in depth.

"Admiral," Izanagi, her personal Artificial Intelligence, spoke up over the external speakers. "The Daxite Warheads are on course to be delivered as per your orders." Ambassador Abu's eyes widened.

"Excellent. Have a team ready to secure them in the hangar bay. I want an N7 team guarding them at all times."

"Yes, Ma'am." She knew Izanagi would relay her order to the rest of the crew.

"Permission to speak freely, ma'am?" One of her crewmembers turned in her chair to face the Admiral proudly.

"Granted," she premised, interested in what the young ensign wanted to say.

"Umâ€¦what's Daxite?" she asked, a bit embarrassingly.

"Ah, yes, I'm not surprised you don't know, since you haven't been in my crew long. It's an _exceptionally_ rare crystal native to parts of this sector of the galaxy. We discovered it not long after we set up shop here in this shipyard. Its properties were unlike anything we've seen before and when you send an electrical charge through itâ€¦wellâ€¦the results areâ€¦"

"Explosive," Abu finished seriously. Being a former OAI operative he knew some of the classified material, even it was highly compartmentalized. "Damn. A single _pound_ of that stuff could level an entire _building_. Just how much did you use to make a _warhead_?"

"I'm afraid that's classified, Ambassador. Need-to-know. These warheads are classified level Ten. Which is _above_ even _your_ security clearance, I'm afraid. Until you get Director's override, you are to keep the existence of the weapons a secret."

"Figures," Abu rolled his eyes and sat back down. Daxite was _incredibly_ lethal if it wasn't handled with extreme caution and care. Adding to that, they synthesized enough of it to put it on a _warhead_? Just what the _hell_ was the URSC planning on doing with it?

Sighing, he scrolled through more names and went over each file one-by-one.

****System Unknown, Time Unknown****

****Turian Facility, NOVA-6****

****February 14****th****, 2168****

The first thing he experienced was the feeling of a jolt, akin to being shocked by static electricity. His eyes snapped open and he could see the inside of his stasis pod being drained of the rejuvenating liquid that provided nutrients while he 'slept' and trained. The mask ripped off from his face showing his glowing cybernetic eyes. The pod opened and Saren-711 took his first step outside in the real world in months. The Turian HUNTER's metal legs stepped slowly on to the tile floor creating an audible clank. He then stood at his full height of seven feet and flexed his muscles, trying as quickly as possible to readjust from being trapped inside the virtual reality simulation.

"It's good to see you've recovered, Saren," General Septimus Oraka said as he watched the supersoldier get accustom to his surroundings..

Saren snapped into a salute, his discipline unwavering even in moments of weakness. "General!" he near-shouted. "A thousand apologies sir for the moment of weakness, it will notâ€¦"

Septimus Oraka waved him off. "Enough. I grow tired of your formalities," he told him dismissively. Saren shown no outward sign of being insulted. "I have a mission for Renengade, young one."

"Of course, sir."

"It's a simple reconnaissance mission on Khar'shan. We believe that a newcomer species will attack the Batarian homeworld. Your mission is to gather information, on this species and report back here for countermeasures to be employed. Probes would be reasonable solution, yes, but watching data won't tell us how they fight on the ground."

"Sounds, simple," Saren admitted. "Butâ€¦if they attackâ€¦how will we escape off the planet?"

"That's already been taken care of, I assure you, Saren. I have a contact that I trust greatly on the planet right now as we speak. He'll smuggle you on the planet in a safe house. Then you'll wait." He stood up. "Garrus and Nihlus are already awake and armored up, along with your new team members. I'd suggest you get acquainted." He left without another word.

Saren nodded and made his way to the armory where he found four other HUNTERS getting suited up and ready for battle.

Garrus, H-850, was already dressed in a slick black in color armor. It may have been similar to the armor used by Havoc soldiers, but it was exceptionally more advanced, being built from the ground up for HUNTERS. Garrus was shorter than Saren by two inches, at 6' 10" and had his organic eyes entirely replaced with synthetic eyes when he was 14 years old to assist in designating targets. The Turian was unquestionably the greatest sniper in the entire HUNTER division, possibly the galaxy. Once he had you in his crosshairs, you were as good as dead and he'd be long gone before the target even hit the ground. The normally wisecracking Turian super soldier had his eyes closed and was meditating, to calm his nerves and as a form of practice to control his breathing.

Nihlus, a HUNTER that was 7'3" was near a computer terminal, accessing data with his omni-tool. His armor was blood red in color and strapped to his back were a Phaeston Assault rifle and an M-300 Claymore. The shotgun was designed for Krogan, but in the hands of HUNTER who had augmented strength that far surpassed the Tuchanka native aliens, it was considered child's play, as Nihlus barely felt any recoil from the gun. He was Saren's XO and filled a variety of roles, from tech support, suppressive fire, close quarters, assassination, among others. He was the classic case of jack-of-all-trade, master of none.

Finally, he was introduced to his newest teammates. He crossed the threshold and the discipline that was installed in the soldiers since they were eight years old, snapped to attention.

Saren dismissed them with a wave of a hand, much like General Oraka had done minutes before.

"Commander, it is an honor to serve under your fireteam." Saren looked at the newcomer. This HUNTER was female, and judging from her

black armor, obviously a Cabal, meaning her skills with biotics were off the charts. She was the shortest of the team, at only 6'8", after Garrus.

"The honor is mine, Silviri. You've quite the reputation. I hope your coveted speed and skills in hand-to-hand serve us all well." Silviri nodded, saying nothing further. Finally, he saw an enormous Turian, who was big, even by HUNTER standards at an astonishing 9'.

"Commander," he deeply intoned, his voice ice-coldâ€|but with a modicum of respect.

"Kryses," Saren acknowledged, recognizing him from the war with rogue Spectres on the Citadel in the simulation. He was ferocious on the battlefield and he used his great size to his advantage. Kryses was the type of HUNTER who would and could, break his enemies in twain, especially Krogan Battlemasters.

This was Renegade Squadron...chosen by General Oraka as the best out of an already elite fighting force. There was no force in the Galaxy, not even the Asari's coveted Commandos, that could stand up to their might, as Saren believed.

'_And nowâ€|to this vagrant species who dare challenge the power of the Turian Hierarchy and our status as the premier military force in the galaxyâ€|we will show you _true_ power.' _

The HUNTERS didn't feel the least bit sorry for the foe they were about to face. They would be the first to show these newcomers the _raw_ might of the Turian military. They hadn't spilled _real_ blood in a while and it was now time for them all to cut loose.

* * *

><p>Khar'Shan, Batarian Homeworld, Harsa System

February 22**nd****, 2168 **

Khar'Shan was on complete and total lockdown. There were thousands upon thousands of warships in orbit and in the system, with constant patrols. That Grand Vizier had grown overtly paranoid after the failure of the Zestirian invasion. Nearly every ship the Hegemony could spare was here, ready to fire at an enemy they knew very little about.

A cruiser, near the outskirts of Harsta started to get strange readings. Thenâ€|it happened. Literally, thousands of slipspace portals opened up and ships from frigate all the way to carrier slipped through. Xavier had promised to bring a force ten times greater and he delivered in spades: there were now over _12,000_ URSC ships, to include the upgraded ships that Zestiria still had, now on a course for the Batarian Homeworld with the intent of taking down the entire regime.

"We've arrived, sir." Mattias told Xavier as he sat in his chair in the URSC dreadnought, _Midnight Sun_. This was _personal_. There was no chance in hell he was going to sit back in Arcturus and wait for reports like some coward. These bastards were going to burn and he

was going to watch the fireworks _up-close_.

"Fleet Master, how long until your ships can be in position?" Xavier asked over FLEETCOM.

"My ships will be ready within 90 seconds, director," Fleet Master Iassa reported from the Sangheili flagship, _Baptism of Fire_.

"Excellent. Might as well have a bit of fun before we get started, until then. Hail ****_all_**** of the ships. I know you've been dying to say _something_ since you haven't seen combat in awhile." He smirked, knowingly.

The female Fleet Master suppressed an amused chuckle, knowing the Human was right. Clearing her throat, Iassa declared confidently to the Batarian Fleet and all Channels.

"Attention Batarian Fleet! This is Fleet Master Iassa 'Sadum of the United Races Space Command Navy! This is not a threat, this is not a bluff, nor is this a hostage situation. This is a _courtesy call_. You have attacked one of our own and you will now face the consequences. You have the next sixty seconds to prepare for your imminent _annihilation_!"

OPERATION: FIRESTORM had just begun.

(END)

Don't forget to read and review!

As you can see, some of the OC categories are now done as I've already chosen my ambassador and HUNTER soldiers. Keep sending more if you got ideas!

And for those of you naysayers worried this will turn into a "Humanity, Fuck yeah!" fix...loool. Just wait, till after the fallout of the Batarian-URSC war, because not only are you outright _wrong_ on where this story is going, you're going to be in for one hell of a surprise. At least, I think so.

11. Hunted in the FIRESTORM

****Mass Effect: The New Journey ****

****Chapter Eleven****: Hunted in the FIRESTORM

Welcome back, ya'll! I wrote this chapter in addition to studying my ass off. Ah, the life of college. Ah, well. I've made it so the URSC-Batarian War is only going to be two chapters, as I realized I dragged out, to some extent, the Zestirian invasion. That's a mistake, which I'm correcting, now. This chapter and the next (_especially_ the next) will be utterly _massive_ covering all theatres: void/space, air, sea, land. There's really no point in dragging this out seeing as you know the outcomeâ€|wellâ€|sort of. Hehehe

And, I'm going to say this once and ONLY once: the Turian HUNTERS are not and I do mean are NOT going to just simply be cannon fodder for

the Spartans/OMEGA to curbstomp at their leisure. They'll be **actual**_threats. The Spartans/OMEGA will take casualties and the HUNTERS will take casualties. The difference is that when a HUNTER engages a URSC super soldier, **you will not know the outcome of the fight**_**. **_**At all.**_ Some HUNTER units will be curbstomped, some Spartans might be curbstomped in return in a different battle by a different unit, and the battle may be close but go in favor of one faction in general. Others might just have dumb fucking luck to escape, let alone win.

Point I'm trying to make? URSC super soldiers aren't invincible Mary-Sues who can't be beaten (the fact that a good many of the Spartans in the Halo canon are fucking **DEAD**_, should hammer this point in hard, but to say some of you fanboys are really really fucking stupid would be an insult to people suffering from stupidity). Outside of a few characters I can count on a single hand, **NO ONE**_ in this story has plot armor.

So, if you still insist for some oddly idiotic reason or the other that the OMEGAs and Spartans curbstomp everything because of some retarded need to read Halo-wank, do us both a favor and **drop this story right now. **_It's not going to change and no amount of bitching in reviews or a private message is going to change that. In fact, you'll be laughed at for wasting your time. So, to put it more bluntly, if you have a problem with the HUNTERS and how they're going to be portrayed, power/skill wise, **stop being whiny and get over yourself. **_You're not that important.

For those of you who want genuine tension and not simple wank for the sake of it, sit back and enjoy the ride!

Disclaimer: I make no claim of anything except my own work. Mass Effect, Halo, and Titanfall are under the rights of Bioware, 343 Industries, and Respawn Entertainment, as well as the publishing rights of Electronic Arts, Microsoft Game Studios, Electronic Arts, all respectively.

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><p>System Unknown, Time Unknown</p>

****February 22****nd****, 2168****

****Office of Strategic Intelligence vessel, **_**Amaterasu**_**

Admiral Sayuri Ishigami sat secluded in a small, but comfortable chair with her legs dignity crossed at the observation deck onboard her personal flagship, the Amaterasu. She was in civilian clothing, a pair of yoga pants, white tank top and plain grey hoodie. In her hand was a wine glass half full of the finest scotch money could buy. She sipped on its contents, sighing, then observing the vacuum of space.

For once in her career, Ishigami honestly had little to do. She and the rest of OSI had already scouted out every single Batarian colony, system and outpost, and reported it all back to the High Admiralty. Her job was essentially finished until the war reached its logical conclusion. She was certainly competent in the art of space warfareâ€”no way in hell would've made the rank of Admiral, otherwiseâ€”, her strength lied in intelligence gathering, a skill

the Japanese woman had virtually no equal.

"Admiralâ€¦you really should get some rest," Izanagi spoke with clear genuine concern, his avatar appearing on a console about one meter away from her. "It's late. Aside from those who have a night shift, the entire crew is asleep." The Artificial Intelligence was correct. It was the equivalent of "2 A.M." of a Standard USG Day.

"Can't really sleep, Izanagi," Sayuri admitted. "I've just beenâ€¦thinking, that's all."

"I see," Izanagi nodded, understanding. "Even still, I recommend you get some rest. Who knows what might happen within the next six hours."

"Noted," Ishigami replied, tersely. There were several moments of silence. "Say, Izanagiâ€¦could we talk?"

The A.I. blinked, not really expecting that inquiry. "Of course, Admiral. What is it you wish to discuss?"

Ishigami waved him off. "No, none of that "Admiral" stuff, this will be informal, cause I want you to be honest with me andâ€¦stuff." She frowned with a slight grimace, the fact that she couldn't articulate the right words at the moment aggravating at her. Grunting, she suppressed it well enough.

"All right then...Sayuri," Izanagi answered, using her first name to indicate they were going personal.

"Izanagiâ€¦am I a hypocrite?" She asked him earnestly, turning in her chair towards him directly facing the console.

"Frankly, Sayuri, you are," Izanagi told her. "You drink on duty when you would punish our ensigns for such blatant disregard for the UCMJ, abuse your authority in subtle ways, yet if Director Xavier is disrespected, you sharply rebuke the person, among other things that we'd be here all night if I truly listed them all." Izanagi held back nothing and Sayuri didn't take offense, thankfully.

"I see," Sayuri grimaced, having expected that. "I've been thinking, Iza...I've done some horrible things. Things that if Miles found out he'dâ€¦" she trailed off.

"Execute you?"

"Worseâ€¦despise me."

Izanagi blinked again. This conversation was taking turns he couldn't have predicted, even with the ability to do trillions of calculations a second. To Sayuri, the idea of the Director hating her terrified her more than her being executed for immoral actions she had condoned. Honestly, he wasn't sure how he personally felt about that revelation.

"Sayuriâ€¦are youâ€¦feeling remorse?" Izanagi cautiously asked.

The Admiral smiled ironically and bit her lip. "Is that what this is? Heh, I guess you can say that." She ran her hands through her hair. "If you were to ask me this four months ago, I would've told you

'hell no'. But when Miles asked me something, I replied coldly about how killing people was so easy and I saw the look in his eyes." She stared at the ground. "I think that was the first time he was genuinely terrified of me."

"Somehow that bothers you?"

"Yeah," she admitted. "At first, I didn't think much of it, but it kept gnawing at me. I didn't have anyone to talk to." That was the downside of having nearly the entire URSC deathly fearful of you. No one cared about your issues, personal wants, or needs. To them, you were simply a woman with four stars and had the power to ruin someone's career. It wasn't that she couldn't fault them for it either; as she played a major hand in her reputation it still hurt.

"I find it pretty odd that now after years of ruthlessness and cut throat actions, now you're starting to find your so-called 'humanity', Sayuri," Izanagi rebuked, crossing his arms.

She actually laughed, genuinely amused. "Wow, you really are giving it to me straight. But, yes, I see your point. So am I. But, we humans are a complex species are we not? We do things even we ourselves don't understand. We like to pretend we're ruled by logic and others are emotions, but we're just as susceptible to them as anyone or any other species. "

"A fair point," the A.I. conceded. "Even still, Sayuri," he frowned. "We started a war to essentially force the Zestirian Pact to come under our jurisdiction."

Just hearing him say it out loud so bluntly made her cringe, as unhinged sorrow swelled up from within her. She looked at her palms. "And I'll have to live with that for the remainder of my natural life." She closed her eyes. "1.7 billion lives lost."

"Do you regret it?"

"In way, I do, and in another, I don't, if only for the fact that we would've eventually had to deal with the Batarian Hegemony, regardless. We just sped it up a few decades." Sitting her wine glass down, she clenched her head. "God so many things could and honestly should, have went wrong, but it all played out perfectly at least...from a certain point-of-view. If he found out," she swallowed hard, as a lone tear ran down her face, which she wiped quickly.

"You actually love him, don't you?"

Sayuri chuckled in response. "Heh, you know what? Fuck it, I guess I do. Me, Sayuri Ishigami, the "Bitch of OSI" actually is in love. God, I feel like some hormonal teenager," she sneered in disgust

"You're human too, Sayuri. Just because you happen to lead OSI doesn't mean you aren't allowed to be a person outside of your job, you know?"

"Tell that to everyone else. They somehow think someone being in a high position of leadership means they can't be human or make mistakes, or be," she searched for the right word, "Childish, I

guess? Miles does have a playful side when he's not working." She smiled at the memories.

"I understand where you're coming from. It's not easy."

There was a pregnant silence, before Ishigami declared, "You know, what? Izanagiâ€¦delete Operation: COUNTERWEIGHT from your files and anything related to it on this ship."

Izanagi actually recoiled in-shock at the near-180 his Admiral was showing. "But Sayuriâ€¦!"

"I know, it's sudden," she admitted. "Butâ€¦this conversation has been a bit of an eye opener. I'm **not** going down that path. Not anymore, as the road to hell is paved with good intentions. We're going to strive for genuine peace with the Citadel, not needlessly antagonize them behind-the-scenes. I have enough blood on my hands. If I was able to so callously sacrifice nearly two billion of our allies, who's to say what kind of atrocities I'd have condoned to species whom outnumbers us and aren't our friends?" she rhetorically quipped. "We're better off with normal relations, if not an eventual mutual partnership, not mutual distrust."

"Are you sure, Admiral?" he asked one last time.

"Yes," she responded, firmly. "War is not something I want to risk by the sub-operations within COUNTERWEIGHT. It ends here. Assuming Ambassador Abu does his job correctly, he'll show that we're a powerful force, but not a hostile one. We'll still offer any species to join, but not...not like how we did a few months ago." She felt disgusted. Even with her sort-of-change-of-heart, her actions on Zestiria still weighed on her and made her feel like a hypocrite. '_What the hell do you see in me, Miles?_'

"I see. What about the Quarians? I do have logs in my databanks of some members of OSI and members of Director Xavier's cabinet tossing the idea around of having them join us."

Ishigami actually gave Izanagi an amused, borderline condescending, laugh, as if what he said was utterly absurd. "Since we're talking very informally, I'm going to blunt with you: honestly, **fuck** the Quarians**_."

Izanagi raised an eyebrow, not exactly surprised, but not necessarily seeing it coming either. "May I inquire why?"

"You've read the Codex I'm sure, probably a million times," Ishigami stated. She wasn't exaggerating. Pretty much every A.I. in USG space had read the Citadel's Codex millions of times over to find any loopholes or laws they'd need to be aware of about before making their existence known. "You think we can just give them some pretty speech about how our A.I. are different and somehow we'll be able to get them to trust us and join us? They've been distrustful of A.I longer the idea of going into space was a possibility for us, let alone feasible. What do we gain? Engineers? The Draxians are just as good, if not better, and they outnumber the Quarians literally 400 to 1 with no foreign diseases that we'll have to find a treatment for undoubtedly. Not to mention, their expertise is based on Element Zero tech. It is highly unlikely they even know about slipspace, so we'd end up having to teach them, negating any reason to entice

them in the first place. The Draxians and Caleans offered us plenty, both in the short term and long term. The Quarians offer us nothing but problems. It's sad state of affairs and I do feel some mild sympathy for them, but their plight is **not** the URSC's problem. Until they come to us, specifically, of their own free will and get over their irrational fear of Artificial Intelligence, they might as well not even exist. We sure as hell will pretend they don't. They're not even a small fish in a big pond. "

It was cold, but it was the truth. The Quarians had **nothing** that the URSC didn't have in spades. Adding to that, their small population would make them irrelevant in a numbers game, for at least a few centuries at best. The only reason the Sangheili population was even remotely as high as it was now was because they were deliberately trying to force a population boom and the fact that they laid eggs instead of live birth only sped up the process exponentially. The Quarians didn't have such an advantage.

"The Krogan, too?" the A.I. queried, now fully curious about the USG's plans, as A.I. were compartmentalized with certain tidbits of classified information by design and by-law, in case of capture and somehow the self-deletion protocols either failed or weren't followed because of sapient incompetence. Essentially, it was a backup plan within a backup plan.

Ishigami shook her head. "Not a chance in hell. They were neutered for a reason. Again, the Caleans are 'our' Krogan, anyhow without all the baggage that comes with it. Parliament is already drafting legislation outlining new regulations and requirements to join the URSC." She then thought for a moment. "You've studied history, right?" It was obviously rhetorical, so she continued on after a moment of pause. "You could think of it as a sort of a parallel to Western Powers in the 20th century's prerequisites and criteria they had to meet before joining NATO, but instead of a collective defense pact, it'd be more akin to willful annexation so to speak."

"An interesting choice of words," Izanagi noted.

She shrugged. "I had no other way of putting it. In any case, unless the Krogan somehow collectively get their shit together, which I find **extremely** unlikely, we aren't touching them with a ten-foot pole. The Citadel Council seems content with letting them go extinct, and to be quite honest, so do we. It's unfortunate and some would argue even cold and immoral, but it's the way things are. We may be compassionate, but we're also practical. This is about as unpractical as it comes. No amount of someone's personal beliefs can trump that."

"And I assume Director Xavier agrees?"

Ishigami nodded in affirmation. "Yes. In fact, he said and I quote, "Fuck no" when the ideas were proposed in private." She snickered, reminiscing of the behind closed doors meeting where she had to control herself from laughing out loud, which would've completely destroyed her image among the Cabinet.

The A.I laughed. "He's a very blunt man."

"Why do you think I love him so much?" Sayuri mused, slowly getting

used to the emotion that was once foreign to her. "Getting to the point and being a straight shooter is how he's gotten so far. I agree with him, naturally. Too many politicians simply speak in coded and carefully guarded language instead of just given it to the people straight. It's a nice breath of fresh air."

"Agreed."

"Soâ€¦like I saidâ€¦delete the files. We're doing this the old fashioned way: Speaking softly, carrying a big stick."

"I like it. Just give me a second. Andâ€¦done." Within a single second, several terabytes worth of data related to the level 10, classified operations were mysteriously deleted. None of Ishigami's subordinates would question the deletion, assuming a change in plans and would carry out their duties as normal.

"Thank you, Izanagiâ€¦for listening. I really needed to get that off my chest."

"You're welcome, Admiral," he gave her a quick salute. "Soâ€¦does that mean you'll start being a bit nicer?"

"Let's not get TOO crazy, now Iza," she smirked, taking a final swig of her alcohol.

"Should've known," he shook his head before looking at her seriously. "Soâ€¦what now?"

"Nowâ€¦we wait. I'm just hoping Miles shows some restraint. He really took it personally." There was no arguing there. Xavier had his legacy under the pile of radioactive ash.

"Director Xavier is a good man. He's angry, but I believe he'll do the right thing. He won't use the Daxite WMDs. Even I find that to be a bit...extreme." Those missiles were extremely deadly, considering there were over 2500 kilograms of Daxite spread evenly thoroughly out the entire warhead. Instead of a linear increase in lethality by packing it all close together, this design boosted the destruction exponentially. There wouldn't be much left of Khar'shan to call home.

" So do I," she conceded. "But let's not pretend there won't be a lot of corpses in the wake of it. I may have given bait, but they sure as hell dug a grave of their own volition."

That was the largest understatement in the galaxy. The URSC as a whole was out for blood. They were going to get it, tenfold. The Hegemony had seen its final metaphorical sunrise. A new dawn was approaching.

* * *

><p>Harsa System

****URSC Invasion****

****February 22****nd****, 2168, URSC standard time. ****

****Onboard Batarian Dreadnought, **_**Ardent Servant**_**

"_Attention Batarian Fleet, this is Fleet Master Iassa 'Sadum of the United Races Space Command! This is not a threat, this is not a bluff, nor is this a hostage situation. This is a mere courtesy call! You have attacked one of our own, and you have the next sixty seconds to prepare for your imminent annihilation!" _

The broadcasted message had sent a chill down every officer's spine as the full scope of what hell the URSC was about to rain down on the Batarian homeworld was beginning to sink in.

Imperial Admiral Zolo Tarkus was the commanding officer of the dreadnought, _Ardent Servant_, serving as not only the flagship and crown jewel of the Batarian Navy, but Tarkus was the overall Commander-in-Chief of the Batarian Armed Forces. There were only _two_ Batarians in the entire Hegemony and, by proxy, the entire galaxy, who had more political power and influence than he: the Grand Vizier and the High Chancellor, both equivalent of the URSC's Secretary of Defense and Director of the Unified Species Government, respectively. Collectively, Batarian civilians unofficially knew the three as the '_troiska val Fela_', _an ancient Batarian phrase meaning "Three-Above-All". There were no Batarians above them, and they made sure it stayed that wayâ€|wellâ€|at least he and the Grand Vizier. The High Chancellor was a moreâ€|moderate leader, who disagreed with the other two vehemently on many issues and even favored an eventual abolition of the status quo. If he were being honest, Tarkus despised the Chancellor, but he had too much influence, even with his radical ideas of change and talks of emancipation. Having the man assassinated and replaced with a figurehead was such a monumentally stupid idea that could and _**would**_ backfire in so many ways Tarkus doubted he could list them all. So, in the wake of the unfortunate reality, the two conspired to merely subvert his authority whenever possible, under his nose, where they were sure they could get away with it. It was how they were able to secure funding for the invasion of that wretched planet in the Skyllian Verge.

But, now, none of that mattered. He was facing down an invasion force large enough that it would give even the Turians during the Krogan Rebellions pause. He had little Intel on their warfare capabilities, but from what he was able to gatherâ€|they were outclassed considerably in almost every conceivable way. The size of their largest ships made the _Destiny Ascension_ look puny in comparison. Any halfway competent commander realized that they didn't use Element Zero as a basis for their technology.

Tarkus breathed in. It was unlikely he was going to live to see tomorrow, but he'd be DAMNMED if he didn't take out as many of the fuckers as he could. He was not a forgiving or kind man, he wasn't arrogant enough to deny his own icy nature, but he was a patriot to the core and he would defend his homeworld to the best of his ability. He might not be able to stop them from invading completely, but he did spend the last few months testing out some new tricks to slow them down, at the least. They were going to land with a bloody nose at the very least.

So, he spoke confidently, giving orders. "All ships, this is the Admiral! Prepare for battle! I want all fighters, launched immediately, staggered formation, stay close, look out for your pilots, but no predictable flight path!"

There were roughly 9,000+ Batarian ships inside Harsa, a good many that were built in the last decade or so, as a mere reaction to the Council increasing its own fleets for reasons unknown. After the failed invasion of Zestiria, Tarkus had ordered just about every single ship, both in port, rusting away, old, new, civilian, etc. to be recalled and repurposed to defend Khar'shan, fearing they could be attacked at any moment. For months, defenses across the entire planet and the system were fortified with as much slave labor and professional work they could spare, to turn Khar'shan into a fortress. It was by no means even on the same level as the defenses around Palaven or even Thessia for that matter, but the Batarian leadership were pressed for time, and was doing the best they could with what little intelligence and funding they had leftover. Now it was time to put it to the test.

As the URSC invasion fleet sailed through the void, half of the Batarian fleet was heading towards them en-masse in over ten staggered formations, each of their ships using their superior maneuverability aided with their mass effect drive cores to constantly switch positions in said formations, in hopes to confuse the URSC's targeting systems, having learned it from the intelligence reports from the failure of the Zestirian invasion fleet.

"All ships in range, sir!"

"All ships, open fire! Use Dyzak firing solutions! I don't want a single second wasted!" A Batarian admiral ordered the brave fleet. True to his orders, half the fleet fired their mass effect cannons in Dyzak concentrations, named after the Turian Admiral who used it during the Krogan Rebellions. Essentially, it took the principle of 'something needs to be getting shot at all times' to its logical conclusion. Eeezo powered military warships fired their Mass Accelerator Guns every two seconds, and, while certainly not slow by any means, in space warfare, every second counted as two seconds could mean the difference between victory and defeat, and that was shown countless times during the close battles of the ancient past. Kreysek Dyzak proposed that when one ship is reloading its main gun for another shot, in that short time frame, another ship should be firing its own weapon as a sort of "cover" for the other ship. Scaled up and to hundreds of ships, there would be constant barrage of Mass Accelerator slugs in the void, making dodging and engagement, far more difficult for the opposing enemy.

Caught nearly off guard, hundreds of slugs sailed through the void and slammed into the URSC's ships. Ironically enough, the frigates, being much smaller targets, were spared the brunt of the assault and merely had their shielding damaged or possibly broken depending on where they were at relative to the Batarian cruisers. The larger ships, mainly the carriers, didn't fair so well. The 4.5-kilometer ships were large targets and thus dozens of slugs slammed into their hulls, the sapphire blue energy shielding pulsing under the barrage of fire. The shielding of carriers, while great, didn't even come halfway close to being as strong the URSC Infinity, and thus with more staggered barrages of slugs had their hulls pierced and some of their crews were exposed to the vacuum of space. In a span of almost one minute, nearly twelve carriers carrying a bus load of N7, Orbital Assault Troopers, TDST, Marines, and Army personnel were taken out of the fight. Also lost were two-dozen destroyers, 78 frigates, and five and six Marathon and Autumn-class cruisers, respectively.

The Batarians had taken their pound of flesh.

"Status Report!" Fleet Admiral Ashdown ordered from the chair of the URSC Polar Night, an Atlas-class URSC dreadnought, which had been commissioned not even thirty days ago. Like the URSC Olympus and URSC Daedalus, the SUMMER Contingency had provided extra military funds and sped up the construction of a plethora of ships.

"Shielding at 60% strength Admiral!" one of his ensigns turned in his chair. "They made an FTL jump and appeared out of nowhere!" That was an understatement. As ready as they were when they arrived, even they were caught off guard by the sudden appearance of the Batarian fleet, head on. They had been expecting the Batarians to simply wait for them and defend Khar'shan as best as they could instead of going on the offense. It was a mistake and brief lapse in judgment on all of their parts; every military commander in the history of human warfare made them, even the greats such as Hannibal, Scipio, Zhukov, Napoleon, Patton, Rommel, and Alexander the Great. But like all mistakes, given the circumstances, they could be corrected.

Like right now.

"All ships! Lower the mass of your MAC rounds and return fire! I want Archers and Jericho missiles by the tens of thousands! Iassa, have your fleet do what you can to stagger their formations! Give us some breathing room!" he ordered over FLEETCOM.

"By your word, Admiral," Iassa replied, beating her chest. The female Fleet Master did as she was ordered and used the Baptism of Fire and several of her CCS-class battlecruisers to launch several plasma torpedoes at one of the ten formations of the aggressive fleet. Dozens of cruisers scattered in an effort to dodge the boils of plasma hurling across space at tremendous speeds. Unfortunately for them, they had no idea of the Covenant's ability to use plasma torpedoes to lock on to ships. Their efforts to dodge were in vain. The boiling plasma had literally melted the kinetic barriers protecting the ship, cooking the crews at over three thousand degrees Celsius. At such temperatures, a plethora of cruisers were effectively atomized, with little left, down to the molecular level.

At the same time, at the order of Fleet Admiral Ashdown, hundreds of commanders and captains of the URSC's vessels did as they were told, eager to get their vengeance for their fallen comrades both here in Harsa and Zestiria. The casks of the MAC guns were flooded with bouts of Element Zero along with a negative electrical charge, to create a small mass effect field inside the firing mechanism.

"Ma'am! MAC slugs at 10% normal mass!" a Weapons Systems Officer on board a URSC Marathon class cruiser reported.

"Fire! Light the bastards up!"

Now weighing in at sixty-tons, the MAC rounds sped out of the ships by the thousands, and they slammed into the 'tip of the spear' where hundreds of Batarian cruisers and frigates were crippled, damaged, most outright destroyed. To add along with the firepower, were thousands of archer missiles and literally hundreds of thousands of

Jericho missiles that had separated into several missiles when they were halfway towards their targets. The GARDIAN defense grids, even with their upgrades, proved nigh useless with the sheer amount of firepower being directed toward them. With the lowered mass of the MAC guns, the URSC invasion fleet could fire semi-automatically, at the same rate-of-fire as a Direct Marksman Rifle used by ground personnel. This dramatically decreased stopping power and potential damage output, but that really wasn't the point. They were aiming to get as many MAC rounds down the void as possible, using a Quantity-over-Quality strategy to put the Batarians on the defensive and buy the fleet some breathing room for their shields to recharge from the initial assault.

And it had worked.

"Sir! They're retreating!" communications officers had reported to Director Xavier. So far, the Director was letting the Navy do its job without micromanaging them, as while push come to serve he could be competent in a space battle (all URSC Directors had to take courses in military strategy and tactics, even if they were prior military), that wasn't his forte. He wouldn't take control of the Fleet until the ground invasion of the planet. But now, was certainly an exception.

"Any ships that needs to have their shields recharge, take the time to do so!" Xavier ordered. "Frigates, Destroyers, and Cruisers who can, follow them! Keep them on the defensive!" As soon as the order was heard, dozens of slipspace ruptures opened up and they sailed through after their A.I. calculated the jump points of their adversaries. "Fighter Wing Designations: Alpha, Bravo, Delta, Lima, Mike, Oscar, X-Ray, provide escort!" From the hangars of the invasion fleet, tens of thousands of Rapiers, Broadwords, and Longswords left their positions and flew out into the void of space, their numbers so numerous they looked like locusts. The amount of materiel and vehicles the URSC had brought to the Batarian Homeworld dwarfed the UNSC even at its absolute height before the Human-Covenant War.

For the next few hours, the URSC and Batarians had engaged in naval warfare. The Batarians were using their fighters to act as nuisances and distractions so their dreadnoughts and cruisers could fire disruptor torpedoes, more Mass Accelerator Slugs, and use their superior maneuverability to attack as swarms and hit-and-run guerilla tactics using FTL. For all intensive purposes, that was, literally, the only reasons the Batarian fleet had lasted even halfway close as long as it did. As soon as the URSC had regrouped and corrected its initial mistake, they had turned the tables very quickly and were essentially doing a slow, but decisive steamroll, taking negligible casualties in the grand scheme of things. The Batarians fleet stood next-to-no chance, but they wouldn't die without a fight.

"One last Batarian dreadnought, sir! I'm getting firing solutions rightâ€" "

"WAIT!" came the voice of Matias, as he appeared on the Midnight Sun's main console.

"Matias? What is it?" Xavier growled out, they were in the middle of an enagement for heaven's sake!

"Sir! We can't destroy that dreadnought! It has one of the top three

Batarian officials on it! I recognize the ship from the databanks I stole from the Batarian Dreadnought we destroyed months ago!"

Xavier's eyes widened in sheer surprise and glee. A smirk appeared on his face. This was going to make his post-invasion plans a hell of a lot easier, that's for sure. "All ships hold your fire! Do not, I repeat, DO NOT engage the Batarian dreadnought unless I SPECIFICALLY say you can." His order was relayed to fighter pilots, commanders, captains, shipmasters, and the Fleet Admiral himself.

"Matias, do me a favor and disable that ship so it can't initiate a self-destruct sequence and immobilize it," Xavier ordered. Due to the sheer amount of activity during combat and things that needed to be regulated on ships outside of human hands, cyber warfare was very limited in the URSC and even then, it wasn't really wanted. An overwhelming majority of the URSC commanders wanted their victories won because of actions done by they themselves, not because of actions done by A.I. The URSC was highly trained and capable, but it needed raw experience in combat to truly become a military force to be reckoned with, and cyber warfare would rob them of that. After all, who's to say they wouldn't come up against a foe in the future that cyber warfare wasn't an option? Thus, the old-fashioned way was preferred.

"On it, Director," Matias saluted and his avatar disappeared, eager to carry out his orders. Xavier contacted both Fleet Admiral Ashdown and the Sangheili Fleet Master Iassa. Within the span of five seconds, both of their images appeared in two glass monitors on either side of the Director, their appearances crystal clear.

"Director, sir!" Ashdown saluted, his five stars on his shoulder were polished to perfection.

"Do we have further orders, Director?" Iassa asked politely, her stature tall, despite her gender normally being the smaller sex of Sangheili.

"Yes, as a matter of fact. I do. I need to borrow several squadrons of your EABTs, Fleet Admiral and some Sangheili Spec Ops soldiers."

"You wish to board the Batarian Flagship to capture a VIP, no?" Iassa deduced.

"Yes, exactly. Mattias will send over any intelligence within the next three minutes, tops, which should give them time to be armed and ready."

"Understood, sir, I'm already on it. They'll be ready. Ashdown, out." The video feed on the monitor cut out.

"Can you spare some troops?" he smirked.

The Fleet master chuckled. "Of course. I'll do even better."

"How so?"

"I'll send the Ghosts."

* * *

><p>Harsa System

**Onboard URSC Dreadnought Polar Night. **

EABT Hangar Bay

February 22**nd****, 2168 **

Major Destin Raiega, a drell, checked the ammo in his highly specialized M-55 Assault Rifle and he finally checked that his suits to make sure he was absolutely would be protected from the harsh and often unforgiving environment of space. All around him were several other soldiers dressed identical to him were making the same extremely thorough checks.

Raiega, like the others in this hangar, were EABTs, or Exo-Atmospheric Boarding Troops. They were extremely specialized, training for zero-g combat in vacuum of space and were experts in propulsion vehicles and jet-packs. Like their name implied, they were the URSC's go to soldiers for boarding actions, be it ships, or hostile space stations, to clear the way for Marines or Sangheili warriors to back them up, once they created an opening. Even N7, who were trained in zero-G combat in Interplanetary Combative training, didn't come close to their skill, because that's what they were specifically trained for and little else. Thus, the training was exceptionally brutal and less than 10% made the cut on any given graduation year.

"All right, listen up! This mission is a directive from Director Xavier himself, classified level 9!" Raiega began. "Our objective is simple! We are to board the flagship of these four-eyed bastards and capture a VIP! However, the Sangheili will be doing the capturing, we get the pleasure of doing all of the hunting! Oorah?"

"OORAH!" The six squadrons cheered, gleeful to finally gain some actual experience along with kicking some Batarian ass.

"Standard formations, you all know the drill!"

The EABTs after doing a final buddy check of each other, sealed their suits, as their helmets, which resembled gas masks, started to pump pure oxygen, no longer breathing the atmosphere of the ship. Climbing on a launch vehicle, with a single handle to hold on and it magnetically locked them into place.

"A-Squadron locked in!"

"B-Squadron Locked in!"

"D-Squadron Locked in!"

"F-Squadron Locked in!"

"All squadrons locked in, sir!" an EABT to the Major's immediate right reported. The Major nodded and gave on last word.

"All right, EABTs, we're expecting heavy resistance, but that's what

we've trained for! Expect Batarian S.T.R.I.K.E operatives."

"Sir!"

"Now, then, men: What's our motto?!"

"THE ABYSS IS OUR HOME!" they collectively shouted. The vehicles launched suddenly, aimed at the final Batarian dreadnought, intending on capturing Admiral Tarkus.

* * *

><p>"Why does it seem that we are only sent on capture-or-kill missions? These are not assignments fitting of warriors of our capability, Tennu!" Malik snarled as the Phantom dropship made its way from the Baptism of Fire, to Ardent Servant.<p>

"Calm yourself, Malik," Tennu reasoned with the Sangheili Ghost. "Consider it an honor for us to be the first to spill the blood of these wretched beasts. Were it up to me, I would glass their entire homeworld and burn their mongrel hides."

"Yes," Fin agreed, checking his Beam rifle. "Not even the Covenant treated our own with such unnecessary cruelty. We shall free our comrades in arms."

"Indeed we shall," Tennu replied, nodding.

"Just whom are we capturing, Tennu?" Dor'n inquired curious.

Tennu pressed his mandibles together and tapped a few buttons on his console. A holographic image of Imperial Admiral Zolo Tarkus appeared. The female Sangheili Spec Ops soldier snarled in disgust. "This man is a powerful political leader as well as being the highest ranking member of the military, he is vital to Director Xavier's schemes for when this conflict is due to end."

"That will take days at the most," Malik snorted.

"Perhaps," Tennu replied, cautiously. "However, he is a skilled man, and his protected by their special forces groups. This will not be an easy mission."

"Good," Dor'n smirked, excited by the mere challenge. "I could use a good workout, myself."

"What of the humans? They will only slow us down."

"I am aware. We will take the VIP ourselves. Their job is to hold the hangar and spread out amongst the ship and keep the security teams occupied."

"Very well, then."

"Commander! Thirty seconds to the landing zone!" the lead pilot called out to the elite Sangheili team. Tennu nodded in thanks and barked orders.

"Check your weapons!" he told them, making sure he had four plasma

grenades, four fusion grenades, a fully charged Energy Sword, a Storm Rifle for his main weapon, and a plasma pistol as a side arm. Fin, instead of his usual Beam Rifle, opted for the kinetic Carbine rifle, with a plethora of ammunition to spare. Instead of an energy sword, he had an energy dagger hidden in his wrists, like all four of them. Dor'n had dual energy swords attached to her hips, fusion grenades, and a plasma repeater. Finally, Malik had opted for the new Type-34 Automatic Rifle, otherwise known as the ****Shrieker**** by URSC Marines. The Shrieker was a hybrid of the Needler and Needle Rifle, capable of fire rapid automatic fire, but the needles were unguided, opted for piercing power. All four Sangheili troops nodded to each other, a silent acknowledgement that they were ready.

"Our Landing Zone is Hot, Commander!"

"Acknowledged, Zelik, take us in! Give the humans a chance to catch their breaths. We shall show them what the Sangheili are capable of." Tenu received an acknowledgement of the order with a green light in his HUD, clearly taking a page from the SPARTANS.

The Phantom locked in on the main docking bay, and judging from the large flashes of light, even visible from this distance, it seemed as if the EABTs were already engaged with a good number of Batarian troopers, but were holding their own decently enough. Revving up the engines, the Phantom dropship came in hot, seemingly out of nowhere through the atmospheric barrier, all three of its plasma guns revving up and making short work of the soldiers defending the hangar bay. Turning horizontally, with the temporary lapse in enemy movement, the Ghosts dropped from the Phantom's bay. Turning again, it laid out some more plasma fire as it slowly, but ever so surely revved the engines in reverse to finally escape the dreadnought and enter the void once more.

Tenu and the others made their way toward Major Reaiga, who was taking cover behind crates and their portable hard light cover.

He actually blinked in surprise. "Holy shit," he exclaimed blinking under his helmet. "I knew we were getting a Sangheili team, but not the Ghosts?! Boys, you're in for a treat!"

Tenu grunted, already annoyed with the human. Was this what it was like for the Spartans? "I have neither the time nor patience for your admiration, Major," Tenu growled, his voice polite, but the clear disdain was there. "What is the situation?"

"Uhâ€¦right. We managed to board without much of hassle at all. Their armor is weak and we were able to board en masse. As expected, we were hit with a good number of resistance, we've been in this hangar, on the defensive, waiting for you to arrive," Reaiga explained.

"Very well," Tenu nodded. "Spread out to the rest of the ship and keep them as busy as you can." He then turned to Dor'n and Fin. "Fin, you assist with one of their squadrons and Dor'N you assist with the other. Malik and I will find this dishonorable Admiral and capture him on our own."

Dor'n wanted to protest, but the look Ghost leader had given her silenced her immediately. "By your word, Commander," she acknowledged with a beat of her chest.

Malik's warrior instincts could sense more troops. "We should make haste, commander," Malik suggested, taking out his Shrieker.

"Let's move out, men! A-Squadron you're with me!"

Malik and Tenu didn't even wait for Major Reaiga to finish barking his orders as both he and his fellow Sangheili turned on Active Camouflage and made their way to the bridge as silently as they could.

"You have piqued my curiosity Tenu," Malik spoke over their COMs. "It is unlike you to split us up, unless vitally important. May I have the honor of inquiring why?"

"I do not wish for the humans and drell among the URSC's forces to take unnecessary casualties, especially in a wretched place like this," he explained. "The two of us are already more than capable of carrying out this mission, so in light of that I chose to have both of them watch out for their troops."

"I see," Malik replied neutrally, accepting the answer for what it was worth. "Do you have any idea of where we're going?"

"Yes," Tenu said resolutely. "The construct who calls himself "Matias" had already downloaded the schematics of this ship and uploaded the fastest route from the hangar to my HUD."

Both of them were silent for the rest of their journey, with Malik following his comrade in arms. They turned left, still cloaked, and came upon a maintenance ladder. As silently as they could, they climbed it, though it was a bit uncomfortable considering their size relative to average Batarians.

There was a sizable Batarian squad moving out, no doubt to wherever the EABTs and the other two Sangheili Ghosts were wreaking havoc. Deciding to ignore stealth, both Sangheili uncloaked before the squadron; causing the Batarian soldiers to nearly trip over themselves in surprise. Both raised their Storm Rifle and Shrieker and let loose a bursts of plasma and Needles. The Storm Rifle, as predicted, ignored the Kinetic Barriers and simply burned flesh and melted armor. The barriers fared little better with the Needles as they pierced right through their armor, causing copious amounts of pain. With a press of a button, Malik remotely detonated the needles in one small-scale pink explosion, finally executing them.

In a span of less than ten seconds, Malik and Tenu had killed ten Batarian S.T.R.I.K.E operatives. Tenu's Storm Rifle had to be cooled and Malik discarded a magazine in his Shrieker, reloading it with a fresh one.

Continuing on their journey, they encountered heavy resistance making stealth virtually impossible. The further they got to the bridge, the more resistance they were met: turrets, machine gun nests, drones, S.T.R.I.K.E units, Enforcers, Vanguard, Biotics, among a plethora of other things. For the first time in a good while, their skills were being pushed to their limits as they had to act as a duo, instead of a Quartet. It didn't matter, in the slightest. Like all Sangheili warriors, the two Ghosts relished in the challenge of potentially being on death's doorstep, and any moment it could end. It was a

thrill that no human, except perhaps a Spartan or OMEGA could ever hope to understand.

They finally came to the doors of that lead to the bridge. Predictably, it was locked tight from the inside, with no way to get in.

"Do you still have Fusion Grenades?" Tenu asked. Malik gave him a grin. Taking out four of the grenades he placed them at strategic points on the reinforced door. Pressing an icon on his wrist, the grenades activated. Instead of a raw, instantaneous explosion like the breaching charges used by the humans, fusion grenades were a slow burn and produced a wide burning effect, slowly but surely melting the steel walls.

"Remember, take the Admiral alive," Tenu reminded, Malik, who simply grunted, but nonetheless acknowledged the order.

By now, the fusion grenades had done their work, and finally, exploded inwards instead of outwards. Both Sangheili rushed inside, not even a second after the explosion, and time seemed to slow down as they could see two squadrons of S.T.R.I.K.E units raising their weapons to fire, along with Imperial Admiral Zolo Tarkus. Both of them started in the center of the group and worked their way outward. Switching to semi-automatic fire, Malik fired several high-powered, high-density needles, aiming five headshots and was rewarded with five instant kills. By the same token, Tenu had gunned all of them down with concentrated plasma, taking off limbs and melting helmets, leaving no traces for facial identification.

Admiral Tarkus, now alone, reached for a lone pistol in desperation, keen on ending it. Malik saw what the Admiral intended to do, but his Shrieker was out of ammo with no time to reload, and Tenu's Storm Rifle had overheated. There simply wasn't enough time. He activated his energy dagger and flicked his wrist in a very precise motion and the dagger left its socket and soared through the air like a throwing knife. The dagger had pierced his palm causing him to scream out in terror and he instinctively went to dislodge the energy weapon from his hand. Tenu was already on him, tackling him to the ground and activating an energy sword to his neck.

"You have lost, Admiral. Accept your defeat with honor."

In response, he spat at the Sangheili Ghost. "Screw your honor, and the rest of your vagrant species! I'll never talk, torture me all you like!"

Tenu grabbed his neck and held him in the air; he was fully disgusted with the Batarian Admiral. "Fool! if you only knew what our Director has planned for your foul race once we finish annihilating your military and dismantling your government. Your Hegemony has seen its last sunrise!" Taking out a cloth, he covered the Batarian's nose and a chemical was released knocking him unconscious.

"This is Ghost-One to Alpha-XX. We have the package secure. I repeat, we have the package secure," he broadcasted.

"Roger Ghost-One. Sending a few Pegasus to pick you up!"

"Affirmative," Tenu acknowledged, before taking a short breath and leaning against the console, where they could see the main viewport. The void of space was filled with thousands of tons of metal that had once been the Batarian Navy. In the course of a single day, the Batarian Hegemony, now, was at its weakest in centuries, possibly even before they discovered Element Zero on Bira, a moon of Verush. Had the URSC been satisfied here, they would've left the Batarians in a badly beaten state, one they would likely never truly recover from. Sadly, were about to get much, much, worse for the four-eyed slavers.

* * *

><p>URSC Midnight Sun

**Thirty Minutes Later **

Admiral Tarkus was suddenly jolted awake and found that he was in a lightly dim room. He tried to move, but found that he was strapped towards the chair with his hands behind his back. He glanced over to his left, and saw two more chairs, exactly like the one he was in.

"So, how do you like your new accommodations, _Admiral_?" Xavier mocked as his form appeared inside the room. Tarkus actually blinked, with both eyes in sheer surprise. Had he not seen the image form with his own two eyes, he would've easily been fooled to think that the Director was _actually_ inside the room.

"Go to hell, human! I have nothing to say to you!" Tarkus growled out. "I'd rather die than betray my species! For the glory of the Hegemony!" he shouted to the top of his lungs, his voice was full of genuine patriotism.

Xavier actually seemed amused. "You seem eager to die. Don't worry, you will, by the end of this campaign, I promise you that you'll join the rest of your military once we finish toppling your government and freeing your captive slaves."

Tarkus' eyes widened in anger. "You wouldn't DARE! They are our property! A symbol of our cultural heritage!"

"Spare me the sanctimonious garbage, Batarian. You disgust me," he snarled. "But regardless of my personal feelings, I do see _potential_ in your species believe it or not. Potential that must be nurtured in the right way. But that's a conversation for a later time. We have two guests missing after all." Xavier glanced to the two chairs beside Tarkus.

"You're after the troiska!" he realized in alarm. If he captured the Grand Vizier and High Chancellor, all hope was lost!

The Bataria could hear the Director clapping. "Congratulations, Admiral. You really are clever. But for now" he snapped his fingers and various view screens that were seemingly hidden by the darkness, came to life. There were parts of the capital, deserts, cities, and rural communities, islands, among other places all over the planet. "The invasion begins in five minutes" he gave the Batarian a dark chuckle. "I'm going to let you watch it burn and

witness as we be greeted as liberators. The status quo ends today. I hope you enjoy the show, Admiral."

Xavier's hologram vanished and Tarkus struggled against his restraints trying to break free from seeing his home that he loved go to the wayside.

No one would hear his screams of anguish.

* * *

><p>URSC Midnight Sun

"What are your orders, Director?" asked a communications officer.

"Have the carriers move up now and began preparations for unleashing hell. I want frigates and destroyers guarding and patrolling the outer rim of Harsa in case we run into reinforcements. We're going for shock-and-awe. Pact ships get first blood, as agreed."

The URSC's plan was simple. They would find and destroy every inch of the Hegemony's military and annihilate it with extreme prejudice. Because they didn't have much intelligence on where they were keeping the captured slaves, they had held off on orbital strikes until an area was certain to be free of human, Draxian, or Caelean slaves. The Pact would be the tip of the spear, landing first, alongside the Orbital Assault Troopers and TDST. Forward Operating Bases would be set up to act as hospitals to treat any freed slave from potential disease, mental trauma, injury, and other health issues. Even with their desire for revenge, there were still strict rules of engagement: no civilian casualties if they could be helped. The URSC was absolutely **NOT** trying to wage a genocidal war despite what the rhetoric might have implied. However, if a civilian somehow took up arms against the invaders, the rules changed and they were fair game. Slaves of all species, including Turians, Asari, Salarian, etc. were to be treated as humanely and diplomatically as possible. The USG was hoping to use the newly freed servants as political leverage, should it come down to it. However, in all actuality, they were hoping it wouldn't come to that and they could simply return to their home systems without incident.

"Orders relayed, sir!" With another pause, she added. "They're ready to go on your command!"

Xavier breathed in. "Well, this is it. Huh, we finally get to the big showdown and I get nervous. I wish you were here, Sayuri. So you could calm my nerves, just like you always do. Despite that cold exterior, I know there's something warm underneath. But I can't think about that right now. We have a war to win and people to free."

He finally exhaled. "Commence Phase 2!"

On his viewport, he could see thousands-upon-thousands of Pegasus dropships descend upon the planet like Locusts filled to the brim with Marines, N7, Army Infantry, and Vehicles. In front of the Pegasus were an equal number of Rapiers, Sabres, Broadwords, Longswords, and a few squadrons of Katana, no doubt ready to establish air superiority for a beachhead to be established.

"To all United Races Space Command personnelâ€|this is Director Xavier. I wish you god speed!"

* * *

><p>Khar'Shan

Sector 15, TDST Forward Operating Base

Five Days Later, February 27**th****, 2168**

Colonel Tyson Greystone sighed, as he dismissed several of his top officers and enlisted, including some N7 teams. As luck would have it, Thane and Kai Leng were assigned to this sector along with his division of Titan Drop Shock Troopers. The war had been going on for nearly 5 Standard Days with virtually no end in sight. The URSC likely would've defeated them sooner, had they not had to worry about civilian and slave casualties, which limited airstrikes, Rules of Engagement, along with making orbital support all but impossible. According to recon teams, it was deliberate. Ever since the failed invasion of Zestiria, the Batarians were mixing their slave population with the civilians and military, counting on the fact that their enemy would show mercy: which they did, to a certain extent. That being said, the Batarians may have been putting up a good fight, but the writing was on the wall: Khar'shan was going to fall. It was just a matter of "when" not if. The only thing they had was sheer numbers and even then, against the technological might of the URSC it wasn't doing much, only slowing them down, due to strict ROEs. Whatever Xavier planned on doing after the war was anyone's guess, but Tyson couldn't have cared less. He had already put in for retirement and was going to spend the rest of his life raising his daughter, as he always should have.

"You would get us assigned to some backwater shithole on this planet," Kai Leng mused crossing the threshold moments after Tyson had concluded their meeting, with a cocky smirk. Leng was in a standard N7 Advanced Combat Infiltration Suit (ACIS), looking more like a futuristic ninja than anything with his two monomolecular blades. He didn't salute. N7 technically followed an entirely different set of rules and had no rank in the traditional sense.

Tyson, to his credit, simply shrugged and laughed him off. "You know, I'm sort of glad. Get to kill Batarians and my chances of seeing Alyx again skyrocket. It's a win-win."

"If you say so," Kai Leng shook his head. "Where's Tarius?"

"Probably catching up with Thane. He hasn't seen his brother in awhile and for once, there's some downtime. Why?"

Kai Leng shrugged and sat down at the table. "Just wanted to know. Haven't seen you two either. Thane and I have been on someâ€|" he paused. "Interesting missionsâ€|and I'll leave it at that."

"Sounds pretty classified," Tyson joked, but Kai Leng wasn't laughing.

'_Tyson, I pray that you never find out what OSI has done behind-the-scenes," _Kai Leng thought, trying to wash away some of his guilty conscience.

Before either could say anything further, the door opened again, much to Tyson's annoyance and Tarius and Thane barged in, both out of breath. "Tyson, you've got a call on Channel X, Priority Alpha," Tarius told him quickly, without preamble.

Tyson immediately went serious as he stood up and pressed a few buttons on his tablet. The room darkened as the call was answered. A holographic image of General Dragovich appeared and were it not for the shimmering effect, there's no way anyone at a glance could tell it wasn't real.

All four present stood ramrod straight and saluted simultaneously. It wasn't everyday where the Commander-in-Chief of_ all_ URSC Ground Forces contacted you personally.

"General, sir!" Tyson reported professionally. "What can I do for you?"

"Da," Dragovich waved them off. "You have no need to worry, Colonel. I find such formalities a waste of time," he intoned, his trademark Russian accent thick, but his English still as perfect as a native speaker.

"Of course, sir."

"Anyhowâ€¦I have aâ€¦personal task for you and a company of your best men. Trust me, you're going to need it," he tiredly said.

Tyson frowned. "Are we heading to the fight on the other side of Khar'shan?" Fighting on Zestiria had given him an intense hatred of urban combat, even if it was only a few hours at best.

Dragovich shook his no. "No. I sent an OMEGA team to Vi'ran to assist Sangheili forces, recover intelligence, technology, and anything they saw fit that would help the cause. They were supposed to report in five hours ago. None of the Sangheili teams are responding either. We need you to go in and find out what the hell happened to them."

All four present had a chill run down their spines. An OMEGA team not reporting in was not only extremely unusual, but downright against protocol, especially considering their skills. He knew it firsthand!

"Sir, can't you spare us a few OMEGAs? We could use the extra hand," Tyson noted, with loaded intentions. Dragovich wasn't stupid; he knew _exactly_ what the Colonel was implying. "Maybe even Blue Team?" he asked hopeful.

"I cannot, I'm afraid. The OMEGAs on planet are doing missions vital to the war effort and you are the closest to the Viran. I've already sent three Xiphos pilots your way. If you move within the hour, they'll be there to give you close-air-support. We're simply too tied up on the main continent and the capital. As for Blue Teamâ€¦I have no idea of their whereabouts."

Kai Leng blinked. "Waitâ€¦what do you mean you don't know,

sir?"

"Exactly as I said," the General grimaced. "They're on a Black Ops mission for the Director himself. Classified level ten."

'_Level __**ten**__?! And not even General Dragovich is aware of it?!' _Thane thought to himself, clearly his alarm bells were ringing. For the Director to classify Blue Team's operation at level 10 AND to leave Dragovich out of the loopâ€|some enormously serious shit was going down.

"I see," Tyson replied neutrally. "Do we have any recon of the area at the very least?"

"Again, no. Vi'ran has a storm overhead that makes scanning difficult, giving inaccurate readings. You'll have to go in blind, but prepared for anything." Dragovich looked at him sympathetically. "I'm really sorry, son. Believe me, if I could leave this matter alone, I would, but you're the best we've got at the moment." To say the General felt lower than dirt would be putting it mildly, but he didn't have much of a choice at the moment.

"I know, sir. I'll do my best," he vowed.

Dragovich sighed and nodded. "I take care of my own. When you get out of this, Colonel, I'm going to personally make sure you get _maximum_ retirement benefits and even make a few phone calls for a job on the outside. You too as well, Sergeant Major," he glanced to the drell in question.

"That sounds damn good," Tarius replied before nearly slapping himself. "Umâ€|sir." Dragovich seemed more amused, than anything and waved him off.

"Anymore questions?" Dragovich inquired. There were none. He gave them a salute. "Then god-speed, gentlemen." His hologram vanished. Tyson had taken notice of the fact that the General used the word "When" instead of "If". It seemed the general had faith in him.

"It seems we have much to prepare for," Thane noted calmly. "We should leave as promptly as we can, if we are to maintain our timeline."

"You're coming with us?" Tarius asked, with a raised brow.

"Of course. This mission will be highly perilous, without question. It would be unwise to leave you without assistance," Thane explained, fully committed.

"Or translated for us normal people," Leng began, "Fuck yeah, we're coming. Haven't fought beside you guys in a long ass time. The four of us on one last mission? We're going out with a fucking bang!"

"Hell yeah!"

Tyson laughed at his three friends. A guy couldn't ask for a better group of companions. "You know, if I'm walking through hell, there's no one I'd rather have by my side than you three," Tyson told them sincerely.

"I hope you realize this mission has us walking through hell too," Tarius joked.

"Duly noted," the colonel mused. "Let's get it done."

"Hooah."

* * *

><p>"CCT, we're approaching LZ Victor-Romeo-Oscar," the pilot of the lead Pegasus dropship called out, as they landed several kilometers from the target area. Attached was a Goliath Main Battle Tank, and the other two Pegasus dropships had troop transport vehicles, along with several dozen veteran TDST soldiers. There were three teams of N7s here, for a total of six, to include Kai Leng and Thane Krios.<p>

"Understood," Tyson acknowledged and charged his MA6B, Assault Rifle. In fact, he had ordered all of the TDSTs here to choose the MA6B instead of the MA6A, simply due to the likelihood of the presence of heavy resistance. They were going to need all the firepower they could get.

"Thane and Kai Leng, you and the other N7 scout ahead, staggered formation. You'll be our eyes and ears," Greystone ordered. Both acknowledge the order and simply vanished out thin air, using active camouflage. The ninja-like soldiers went into a slight jog vanishing into the darkness.

"A fucking jungle, just what we need," a TDST operative stated distastefully, looking at their surroundings.

"Meh, rather be here, than at the capital. Hear the Zestirians are really giving the Batarians some serious payback. Don't blame 'em to be honest."

"Cut the chatter," Tarius interrupted, climbing on top of the Goliath to hitch a ride. Tyson joined him. "We still got a job. Let's find out what happen to the OMEGA team and get the hell out of here."

"Sir!"

Tyson smirked. It was nice not having to always give orders. He and Tarius were always in sync.

"Any word from our birds?"

"We made it in time, sir," one of his lieutenants answered. "Xiphos pilots should be overhead for air support within ten minutes."

With a final nod, Charlie Company moved out, keen on carrying out their mission as effectively as possible. Tyson allowed himself to relax for a bit as the Goliath moved at speeds of nearly 90 kph, which was a feat in itself considering the tank's sheer size.

"So, what do you think is out there? S.T.R.I.K.E units?" Tarius questioned Tyson over the tanks engine.

Colonel Greystone shook his head. "No. I don't think so. There's no way in hell." S.T.R.I.K.E may have been good by Batarian standards, but to the OMEGA they were simply mere annoying gnats. They were experienced enough to go head-to-head with some of the URSC's elite special forces, with the upper echelon veterans giving the Orbital Assault Troopers some trouble; they were simply massacred by OMEGA. Most of the casualties the URSC super soldiers took were from heavy weapons and vehicles, and even then it wasn't necessarily a guaranteed win.

"Figured," Tarius scoffed before shivering. "This place gives me the fucking creeps." Tyson agreed wholeheartedly. Considering this was a planet-wide invasion with over 70 million URSC soldiers, there should've been a cacophony of war, but all was silent. Not even the slightest noise of gunfire was heard.

"No kidding, sir," another TDST soldier, a staff sergeant, agreed. There was audible shivering. Tyson swallowed his fear as the tank pressed on. He wished he had some TITANs for backup, but they were lucky they could spare a Goliath MBT, let alone a few mechs. The FOB, as unfortunate as it was, was a larger priority at the moment, so all of the Titans stayed there, either for maintenance or patrol.

Before Tyson could give an order, Kai Leng and Thane had raised a red flag. The Goliath halted immediately.

"Wonder what's up?"

_Houston, we have a problem. _

Every single soldier in the small platoon went white as a sheet, in sheer horror. That was a red flag phrase that was reserved for the highest of threat levels, to include biological weapons, nuclear radiation, and even.

"Colonel." It was Kai Leng. His tone was so serious that had Tyson not known him for nearly a decade he likely wouldn't have recognized him. "Sir...you've got to see this."

"Understood. We're on our way," Tyson replied, before shutting his communications off.

"Holy shit, sir!" Tarius said, looking at his CO. "Did you hear that? His voice was cracking."

"I know," Tyson said simply, trying to calm his nerves and, so far, he was failing miserably. At Tyson's order, the Goliath tank rolled out, double time. A number of scenarios started to run inside his head. Did they find another nuclear stockpile? If that was the case, the Director himself needed to know immediately. Just what in the hell had they gotten themselves into?

After a few minutes of riding, the Goliath had come upon a small town in the middle of the jungle, which, not to Tyson's surprise, completely deserted. The roads were damaged and it seemed a small skirmish had taken place. Greystone was almost disappointed, seeing as he hyped himself up in anticipation of what the N7 had uncovered.

He got his wish as the Goliath turned the corner around the city

block.

"Holyâ€¦shit."

There were corpses, everywhere, as far as the eye could see. They were from the URSC, to boot, mainly Sangheili. Their bodies were mangled, disfigured, and otherwise mutilated to near unrecognizability. Sangheili of all ranks were littered among the dead, from minor all the way to Ultra and Zealot. Most of their bodies had slash marks as if cut with an extremely sharp object, instead of being shot with a weapon like one would think. Even the Unggoy weren't spared from the brutal sight. Several of them were decapitated and methane tanks were still leaking, if only slowly. Plasma weapons were littered all over the ground along with energy swords that were still activated.

"Jesus fucking Christ," Tarius cursed. "What the fuck happened here?"

"I don't know, Sergeant Major," Greystone grimaced as the tank rolled on past the dead. The free-running Shock Troopers silently paid their respect to their fallen alien comrades. Coming to the central business district, were the N7 teams waiting for them. The tank stopped and all of the soldiers hopped off, lightly keeping their guard up.

"You got any ideas of what happened here?" Tyson asked Kai Leng, who was completely serious.

"No," he said honestly. "Butâ€¦"

"Butâ€¦?"

"Colonel," Thane spoke up coming towards them. "There's something you need to see."

Greystone nodded before ordering his men to search the town, while Tarius and four other TDST operatives would follow the N7 team. Coming up to small garden that had its contents long since dead...were corpses...of Fireteams Majestic and Crimson. The SPARTAN-IV fireteams had been brutally and thoroughly annihilated by whatever force was responsible for all this death and destruction. There were slash marks, like the Sangheili, but one Spartan's entire chest had been caved in with a large _dent_ in the chest plate of his armor.

"My godâ€¦"

"I remember fighting these guys back on ARCHON. I think they were Crimson team, I think? They ran circles around us, sure, but manâ€¦I didn't figure they'd end up like this."

"No kidding. I never thought I'd see _**one**_ OMEGA dead, let alone _ten_ of them in the same general area."

"Did you mess with the bodies in any way?" Tyson asked Thane.

"No," the drell replied. "We wouldn't dare disturb them without thorough investigation."

"Sir, look at this blood," one of the TDST operative, named Jackson, noted. "It's dry."

"Damn. Poor bastards have been dead for hours, if not days. No wonder they didn't report in."

Tarius stared intensely at all of their chests and ammo pouches. With each passing glance, his eyes started to elongate further and further. "Ohâ€¦shit," he cursed as realization dawned on him. "Colonel, look at their pouches."

Tyson was confused for a split second, before complying. Not even five seconds passed before he immediately caught on to what Tarius was implying. Just to confirm his theory, he checked the ammo of the weapons they had left behind. It was half-empty.

"Son-of-fucking bitch."

"Sir?"

"Their pouches are full. URSC soldiers have eleven spare magazines for reloading of their primary weapons. All eleven of their magazines are still inside their pouches and their weapons are half empty. These OMEGA soldiers died before they even got a chance to reload even _once_."

There was a pregnant silence.

"Sirâ€¦do you think the Batarians have their ownâ€¦wellâ€¦you knowâ€¦" Jackson asked with a gulp, as a very primal fear rose within him.

Of course, Tyson knew what he was referring to: the Batarians having their own super soldiers was an idea that was tossed around by the top brass merely as a precaution, but Admiral Ishigami's intelligence had disproved that notion almost immediately. Sure the Batarians had tried, in the past, but they were mostly unsuccessful and abandoned the concept decades, if not centuries, before the URSC had made _contact_ with the Sangheili. It wasn't until very recently had they started to re-arm and make their military worth a damn. The idea that they could start and create a super soldier program in that little amount of time was completely ludicrous.

"Noâ€¦" Tyson shook his head. "Batarians couldn't have that capabilityâ€¦"

"Just twenty minutes ago we all assumed an OMEGA soldier couldn't be killed," he pointed out. Tyson grunted, conceding to the Corporal's point.

In a sudden moment, all of the N7 reacted simultaneously, with precision that _almost_ would've impressed John-117 and drew their silenced weapons. "We got company." Kai Leng called out.

* * *

><p>Garrus had each of the TDST operatives and the three N7 teams lined in his Krysaë sniper rifle. He was around two kilometers out so he had to adjust for wind-speed, bullet drop, and the curvature of the planet, all minute details that were drilled into him for decades

of intense and deadly training. Lining up a target was second nature to the Turian HUNTER. He and his weapon were one, forged together through the trials of the battlefield, a lifetime of experience culminating here and now.<p>

"All targets acquired," Garrus called out over the private channel of Renegade squadron.

"Do not engage," came the voice of Saren, Renegade's leader, as he deactivated his Tactical Cloak, observing the battlefield with his arms crossed, nonchalantly.

Garrus resisted the urge to roll his eyes. "Why not? I can easily take them all out one-by-one," the marksmen stated. It was the truth. Were Garrus given the order, Colonel Greystone, the TDST, and the N7 teams would be dead before they could even react or mount up an effective resistance.

"Yes, I well aware of that," Saren retorted. "But, I'm allowing Silvari and Kryses to have some fun. These humans may be skilled, but they are nothing compared to us. General Oraka overestimated them." If Saren were honest with himself, he was thoroughly disappointed by the performance of the so-called "elite" soldiers of the URSC military. Garrus and Silvari defeated the Sangheili, using a combination of close-range combat and long-range uncertainty. Kryses and Nihlus had engaged one Spartan fireteams, while he engaged the other single-handedly. They were systematically overwhelmed within a short-time span. Renegade wasn't known as the best HUNTER unit for no reason. Fireteams Majestic and Crimson didn't know it at the time, but their hopes of coming out of the fight alive was practically zero, the moment Saren had lead the attack.

"Understood," Garrus replied simply.

"Silvari&Kryses&engage. Let's see if the General was correct in his assessment of your abilities," Saren ordered, coldly.

"Understood, sir," Silvari retorted, the female Cabal cracking her neck. Kryses didn't say much of anything, except grunting.

Nihlus deactivated his own Tactical Cloak, but Saren had long sensed his presence. "Do you not think of them capable?"

"I do," Saren assured, evenly. "I'm just interested in how&creative they'll get when trying to impress me."

Nihlus shook his head. "You have a cynical sense of humor."

Saren almost cracked a smile at his fellow super soldier. "It's what I live for. Now, then&" he gazed down. "I wonder how long these humans will last."

* * *

><p>Kryses and Silvari deactivated their tactical cloaks and appeared in a large narrow road about 200 meters from Colonel Greystone and his team. Kryses stood at over nine feet tall, evenly, his size easily matching some of the Caleans and his stature contrasted with the relatively short Cabal next to him.<p>

"Silvari, give me a set of armor," Kryses demanded, but in a polite manner. The Turian HUNTER scoffed, but did so. Glowing red with mass effect energy, she essentially "gave" the enormous Turian a biotic power developed by the HUNTER Cabals: Biotic Armor. It was essentially aesthetically similar to tech-armor but far more sophisticated, durable, covered more vital areas, and was blood red in color. Cabals could use it on themselves or to allies.

The minute it was up, the human soldiers engaged them, their hybrid rounds, bouncing off their shields, harmlessly. The TDSTs expected them to go down in a barrage of fire, seeing as how their weapons fazed right through Batarians' kinetic barriers. Unfortunately, that wasn't the case at all. The rounds hit a blue shielding that was hexagonal in its design that covered their entire bodies.

"What the fuck?" Tyson blinked in surprise, not expecting that at all. He was about to ask Tarius what the hell was going on, but he was already on the money.

"Holy shit. These guys have shielding like us! It's not quite the same, but—" Tarius didn't have to finish it. Kryses was already on the nearest TDST trooper. He didn't bother drawing his Phaeston Assault rifle that was magnetically attached to his back. He went straight for hand-to-hand. The brave special forces operative didn't have time to react as he was punched so hard he was sent flying into the wall with such force, that he near splattered on impact, barely leaving anything recognizable left. The soldier was dead before his corpse even made a blood stain. HUNTERS were designed to be able to engage a Krogan one-on-one in unarmed combat, and come out on top ten-out-of-ten times.

"HOLY SHIT!" Tyson cursed loudly. "Fall back!" he ordered the team, laying down suppressive fire, while the teams did a full sprint retreat.

"Tell me still we have those Xiphos pilots!"

"Way ahead of you, sir!"

"Guardian, this is Black Knight squadron lead, call sign Raptor, do you read me over?" The Xiphos pilot called out as he and two other Xiphos rushed in from nearly 10,000 feet in the air to assist.

"Black Knight, this is Guardian!" Tyson called out. "I got two targets, north of my position! I need you to put down everything you've got! Threat is OMEGA-level. I repeat threat is OMEGA level! Conduct Anti-Super Soldier Warfare!"

"Copy, sir, be there as soon as we can!" Black Knight replied. As calm as his voice was over the radio, he was nervous as all hell. Had the Batarians created super soldiers? How in the hell—?

"I got two targets!" one of his wingman called out and he confirmed it himself. "My god—" He was one of the privileged few to know about the Citadel Codex and the aliens of the Citadel. These were Turians—ridiculously large ones at that! What the hell were they doing on Khar'shan?

"Targets locking on!" In his Heads-up-Display, synchronized with his fellow pilots, a large red 'dot' appeared over both Kryses and Silvari, who were walking impassively, as if the three, straight-wing, attack-aircraft were insignificant to their perceived notion of power.

"Raptor-One-One, you're clear!" Tarius yelled. "Let 'em have it!"

The three jets came in low for a strafing run, at the nap of the earth. Simultaneously, the three pilots held down the trigger on their joysticks, and Hybrid 30mm Plasma-Kinetic rounds unleashed devastating powerful rounds at nearly 4000 RPM. Silvari's eyes widened and used her reflexes to dodge to the left, her body a blur. Not a single round even tagged her, due to her moving out of the way before the trigger was even pressed in the cockpit. "Kryses MOVE!" she tried to warn, but to no avail.

The large HUNTER took the brunt of the attack, his biotic armor was shattered, along with his Omnicore shielding, and he was hurled down the street and impacted on a lamp pole, destroying it, some forty feet back. For a good moment, the giant was unmoving. The jets flew over the motionless body and banked to the right.

The TDST, who had regrouped together, had cheered! "Hell yeah! That's what I'm talking about, baby!"

"Holy _shit,_ did you see that?!"

Tyson grinned from ear-to-ear. Looks like these fuckers _could_ die after all. "Raptor, Raptor, damn good hit! Request _immediate_ re-attack!"

"Roger, Guardian, we'll make a second pass on a heading of 218 degrees!"

While the Xiphos were circling around, Silvari used her eyes to scan Kryses. He was still alive, thankfully. She frowned. Had she not thrown up Biotic Armor on the HUNTER, it was _very_ likely he would've been dead. Not even their Omnicore shielding was designed to take such an attack. They had gotten careless and Kryses _had_ to have been the luckiest Turian in the galaxy right now.

That was a mistake that was going to be rectified, _now_.

To Tyson and the others sheer horror, Kryses had picked himself off the ground, if only slowly, allowing his shields to fully recharge. He cracked his neck and shook off all of the debris that had built up over the course of their engagement. With his enhanced cybernetic eyes he could clearly see the Xiphos pilots were ready for their second attack.

This time he was ready.

Kryses stretched his synthetic leg muscles and started with a small jog, then one small leap, then another ten feet across, then with a final leap, he jumped so high and with such force that he left small craters in his wake with each jump. He shot through the air like a bullet, aided with miniature rocket boosters. That was the _last_ thing the Xiphos pilots expected and the sheer surprise of one their

targets leaping towards them caused them to hesitate. Had they not, they could've have fired and possibly killed the HUNTER.

But that moment of hesitation was a fatal mistake and Kryses took full advantage of it. Holding his breath and sending power to the boosters in his legs and upper back, he did a Havoc Strike to collide with the cockpit of the lead Xiphos fighter.

"Raptor! Eject, EJECT!"

It was far too late for such an action. Using all of his might, Kryses, smashed the canopy open with brute force, the reinforced glass shattering under his augmented strength. The moment the canopy was destroyed he grabbed the pilot's head and crushed his cranium like a grape, killing him instantly. He jumped off the pilotless gunship and it crashed into the street below, causing burning wreckage.

The other pilot didn't get a chance to react. Garrus had them in his sights the entire time. He had already had Saren's permission to engage. In a shot that would rival a certain SPARTAN-II, Garrus fired from his prone position. The sniper rifle, switched to fire high penetration incendiary rounds, penetrated the canopy, and shot him in the chest. He, along with his fellow wingman, perished in the crash.

Tyson could hardly believe what the hell he just witnessed. Not even the OMEGA, to his knowledge mind you, was so ballsy as to take out a Xiphos with their bare hands! He gave a deep sigh and started a quick prayer. 'Forgive me, Alyx. Looks like we won't be going to that park after all. I'm glad I was able to meet you. It just wasn't meant to be. Let it be known that your father went out swinging.'

—

"Soâ€|this is it, huh?" Tarius said as he checked his ammo from behind cover.

"Yeahâ€|" Tyson replied solemnly. "I don't see how we survive this. " Thane and Kai Leng were to his left and Tarius to his right. His other operatives were trying their best engaging the female HUNTER, with little-to-no success. She was practically toying with him, in the same vein that the OMEGA had on ARCHON almost ten years prior. Silviri glowed blue, and blurred with a biotic charge in multiple directions, hitting several of his subordinates, one-by-one, so fast that it was as if she were teleporting.

Thane looked at all of them. "It's been an honor gentlemen. I couldn't have asked for better companions," he calmly admitted. "Dying with my brothers. There is no greater honor."

"Likewise, Thane," Tyson bitterly choked out, wishing he could see his daughter one last time.

"Then let's go out with a fucking bang!" Kai Leng drew his monomolecular blade and his pistol to charge the female HUNTER. "Thane! Back me up!" Thane didn't need to be told twice. His shields had recharged and instead of drawing his sword, like Kai Leng, he took out two silenced submachine guns from both of his thighs. Using agility honed from the months of brutal training in the jungles of Brazil and the added mobility of the ACIS suit, he flipped over cover

and fired both SMGs the hybrid rounds depleting Silviri's shields.

The HUNTER grunted and dodged a swipe from another N7 who aimed to decapitate her with his monomolecular blade. She grabbed his arm and with virtually no effort at all, pull his dominant arm out its socket, causing him to scream in pain. She grabbed his blade that was falling in mid-air and stabbed him in his neck first, going all the way towards the protective guard and then using both hands to decapitate him. His partner, female, yelled in rage charging to avenge her fallen N7 partner. Silviri smirked as her battle instincts took over fully. She threw the monomolecular away, disgusted that she had to use a human weapon. Sending energy to her right wrist, she summoned her ARC blade, a HUNTER weapon, similar to the Omniblade, but deep sapphire blue in color. She engaged with the female N7, with their blades connecting. Every slash was parried, blocked, or outright dodged. The N7 tried to go for a finishing move with a Shadow Strike, but unfortunately for her, Silviri had predicted the move well in advance. The moment she tried strike her from behind, Silviri turned counterclockwise and activated her left arm's ARC blade and eviscerated her. The valiant woman was dead before she hit the ground.

Her eyes widening slightly, she boosted to the left, dodging a Warp from Thane, who was using his biotics to complement his SMG fire. Silviri could tell that he had enveloped a biotic barrier to complement his armor's shielding. Not knowing the full extent of his biotic abilities, she did a biotic charge at high velocities and slammed right into the drell, who was knocked back a good one hundred feet and skidded to a stop, kicking up dust. His biotic barrier and full shield strength was the only reason he was even remotely alive, as his armor's integrity was compromised. He wasn't expired yet, but he was on precipice of death regardless.

"Godâ€|dammitâ€|" Thane coughed up blood, and with as much willpower as he could, activated the ACIS armor inner medigel, to at least stop the bleeding. He fell over, the world going black.

"Thane!" Kai Leng called out, rushing as fast he could to his N7 partner. Silviri intercepted him and did a sidekick, crushing several ribs and collapsing his left lung.

"You humans are weakâ€|unsure of yourselves," the Cabal taunted. "We are the apex of Turian evolution, engineering, and ingenuity. You could never hope to compare." Kai Leng, in pure defiance, leapt at her to stab her horizontally. She parried his blade with the back of her palm, destroying the katana, and grabbed him high by his neck, then with nearly all her might, slammed him into the ground, causing a crack in the concrete as well as his armor. Nearly every bone in the N7's body was broken, and he couldn't feel his legs anymore: no doubt the HUNTER had paralyzed him. He glared at the Turian super soldier, daring her to get it over with.

"And as history has provenâ€|" she activated both of her ARC blades and stabbed Kai Leng in his neck in a cross. "Evolutionâ€|_always_ wins." She saw the light in his eyes go out which confirmed it:

Kai Leng was dead.

Silviri turned her attention to Kryses' battle. As expected, the

Humans were being beaten back and the HUNTER was toying with them. A dozen Titan Drop Shock Troopers were already dead, killed by the hulking giant and the Goliath tank was destroyed, no doubt by heavy weapons. Silvani was about to step in to help him before an unknown adversary swept her off her feet. She recovered quickly, doing a reverse boost and skidding backwards to a stop. She pulled out her shotgun and pumped several rounds in the general direction. She was rewarded, seeing an outline of energy shielding and her assailant's Tactical Cloak was deactivated. Her eyes narrowed, as the green armored figure came into existence. On the breastplate she saw three distinct letters.

087

Near Kryses, he was forced into cover because of skillfully placed shots of Hybrid rounds.

Tyson was holding Tarius, who was nearly on death's door, they both were in complete shock, fully expecting themselves to die here!

"Are you all right, Colonel?" came the voice of John-117 as he and Fred deactivated active camoflage, with Fred still keeping the pressure on the Turian HUNTER.

"Iâ€¦." Tyson blinked. "Commander? Iâ€¦what are youâ€¦?"

"I'm afraid that's classified, need-to-know," John told the TDST trooper. He gave some medigel to the drell, with a quick application. "That won't last long. He needs medical attention. Go. We'll handle things, here," he vowed. Both Tarius and Colonel Greystone frowned, but nonetheless took the rest of his me (only three counting himself and Tarius), and snuck their way out of the town back to an LZ John had called in.

John, satisfied he had saved the lives of the TDST, turned his attention to the HUNTERS. "Turian warriorsâ€¦pretty damn tough," Fred grimaced, taking cover to reload his Direct Marksman Rifle.

John had nodded in agreement before his shields flared again. He glanced upwards and aimed his assault rifle to a nearby roof, to face Saren himself, who was aiming a HUNTER grade, Phaeston Assault rifle at the legendary hero.

"Are you the leader of these group of super humans?" Saren asked calmly, to which John didn't answer, he just kept his rifle aimed at him. It didn't matter though. Saren's question was obviously rhetorical.

"I suppose it matters not," the Renegade leader shrugged, before glaring mercilessly at the Master Chief. "You all will die the same."

"Johnâ€¦" Cortana spoke to him seriously. "You need to go _all out_. This Turianâ€¦he's dangerousâ€¦even for _you_. You cannot underestimate him!"

"Noted," John acknowledged, before boosting up to the roof firing rounds from his MA6A. Saren did the same with Phaeston.

An Unstoppable Force had met an Immovable Object, as Blue Team as a

whole had engaged Renegade Squadron in what would inarguably be one of, if not the, toughest battles either squadron had ever faced.

* * *

><p>And that's it! Sorry to leave you on a cliffhanger, but this chapter was getting supremely long, and I just didn't have the time nor patience to cut it up.<p>

As you can see, Ishigami is going through character development and she's taking steps to correct her amoral actions.

As I said before, the HUNTERS aren't going to be cannon fodder. Suck it up and deal with it or kindly get the fuck out. You sure as fuck won't be missed. There are plenty of other stories on this site if you want to read Halo-wank. This is NOT one of them. Because let's be honest and keep it real, had I had Master Chief, Fred, Six, or any of the IIs do what the HUNTERS just pulled off would people bitch? Maybe three or four, but by and large no, you wouldn't say a goddamn word, because again, because it's Halo, it's okay. Hypocrisy at its finest. You take the canon way, WAY too seriously. Because by and large you're the exact reason all of these Halo/ME crossovers have the same beats and cliches. Constant bitching about canon, yet when it's given to you, you complain about lack of originality? Again, your hypocrisy is telling. You don't know what you want.

And, yes, Kai Leng isn't just dead, he's deader than dead. So there, for those of you who wanted him gone—there you go.

Next Chapter is the epic conclusion of the URSC-Batarian War, along with a surprise ending that I hinted at in this chapter. Can you figure it out?

****Codex**:**

****HUNTERS****

****Turian HUNTERS**:** The HUNTER program is the Turian Hierarchy's greatest unknown trump card, equivalent to the Prothean Beacon on Thessia in terms of secrecy. Conjured up as an idea in 2135, URSC standard, the Turian Hierarchy wanted soldiers who could equal and surpass the Asari Commandos, but in a far timelier manner. Much like the UNSC's SPARTAN-II program, the Turians conscripted thousands of Turian youth at the age of eight years old, a full seven years before they'd go through the Hierarchy's mandatory military service. They were taught in all forms of warfare for years until the age of 15 where they'd be augmented. HUNTERS, as teens, were trained in ways that even "Blackwatch" would find "extreme. To build their experience, while making their existence covert, HUNTERS were routinely sent into the Terminus Systems to test their abilities, as well as get rid of thorns in the Council's side. They left no traces of their presence, even from the watchful eyes of the Salarian Task Group. To complement their real world training, HUNTERS take part in a virtual reality simulation to keep their skills as sharp and deadly as possible. Now, over thirty years later, the HUNTERS are now generally considered the most skilled and powerful soldiers in the Galaxy.

****HUNTER Augmentations****-In a sharp contrast to the URSC's OMEGA division, HUNTER augmentations are more mechanical than

biological/chemical. In truth, less than thirty-nine percent of a HUNTER's physiology is living tissue. This is most evident in the fact that the nervous system of the super soldiers are made entirely out of ultra-thin high speed artificial fiber optic cables, rather than living nerves. The cables, as opposed to nerve cells, carry information to the brain at speeds far exceeding an unaugmented Turian. Because of this, HUNTER reflexes are, on average, exceed their URSC counterparts with the exception of a very few. In addition to this because of the augmentations and their custom made armor, a HUNTER can lift five-to-ten times his/her own body weight depending on a variety of external factors at play at the time. In addition, each HUNTER can customize his or her own augmentations to suit their own skillset, unlike the OMEGA, whose augmentations were standardized across the board.

****Omnicores Shielding-** ****Developed exclusively by the Turian Hierarchy's top engineers, Omnicore shielding is a breakthrough shielding technology that uses a set of multiple Kinetic Charge Emitters found exclusively in the armor used by the HUNTER division. The cores provide large amounts of charge particles that take the appearance of a series of blue hexagonal shaped 'shields' connected to each other like a puzzle. Unlike traditional Kinetic Barriers, Omnicore shields block both energy and kinetic weaponry. The shielding is highly experimental and, as such, are only used by the HUNTERS. There are plans by the Turian Hierarchy to adapt the shielding to the Citadel Navy, with Turian dreadnoughts being priority.**

****ARC Blades**:** Augmented Reprisal Cut Blades are the standard issue close quarters weapon used by HUNTERS. Unlike the Omniblade used by standard infantry units in the Citadel military, ARC blades were designed from the ground up to be weaponized. The blade itself works very similar to the Omni-blade, with two crucial differences: its sapphire blue color and ability to pierce nearly any material with relative ease.

****Biotics**:** Relatively speaking, the amount of biotics in the HUNTER division is minor, roughly around the same percentage of biotics in the Turian military. However, the few biotics in the division, also called Cabals, are exceptionally powerful. Only the very oldest Asari Justicars and Matriarchs can match their sheer skill and abilities.

****Biotic Armor**:** An analogue to Tech Armor, this Biotic ability developed by HUNTER Cabals, by concentrating mass effect fields around their bodies or the bodies of others temporarily, Cabals create a set of biotic pieces which covers their vital areas from bullets and other hazards. The Armor is outstandingly strong, as demonstrated by the HUNTER Kryses surviving a burst from the main gun of the URSC's A-200 Xiphos fighter jet.

****Flash Charge**:** A Biotic ability exclusively used by the Turian HUNTER Silviri. Multi Charge is essentially a high-speed biotic ability combining her speed with Biotic charge. Multi Charge is weaker than a singular Biotic Charge, but it can take out up to a dozen enemies in quick succession with a blue "blur" in her wake so fast it seems as if she's teleporting.

****U.S.G**:** The Unified Species Government is the overall governing body of Humanity, its alien allies, and all of its Colonies. The

Unified Species Charter is set up explicitly with one goal in mind: keep the species and humanity unified. Learning from the mistakes the UNSC made, the USG government is set up where all of the colonies have a say in shaping interstellar policy. The colonies of the USG have some degree of autonomy, but it's abundantly clear that the USG has the right to step in at anytime to force compliance were a colony to step out of line. The USG Parliament, essentially control Earth as they form its shield and sword.

The USG runs on a Parliamentary system of government, with representatives from each colony and Earth discuss and debate matters of concern. The Legislative branch is made up of entirely of humans and drell, with the latter making up forty-eight percent of the body. Similar to the United States, an election is held every two years for a percentage of the body, and all lawmakers run a six-year term. The executive branch, due to how the Alliance was initially set up a century earlier runs differently. The head of the USG and subsequently the United Races Space Command is referred to as "Director" not "President" or "Prime Minister". He or she essentially has no term limits and may only be removed by the majority vote of both the people and the USG Parliament. Xavier is approaching the record for longest serving Director. It's generally argued by scholars within universities that the URSC will never have a non-human Director with a plethora of decades long research and studies that back up the claim.

****Director of the United Species Government****: The Director of the U.S.G is both head-of-state and head-of-government, and subsequently the single most powerful sapient being in the entirety of USG space. In times of emergency and war, the Director of the USG has near dictatorial powers, able to override the USG Parliament in the name of galactic security. As Commander-in-Chief of the United Races Space Command, the director wields enormous power, both executive and political. To increase accountability and to deny the top officials of the government plausible deniability excuse, there is no classified document that the Director is not cleared for and he/she has the ability to redact what he/she wants as they see fit for anyone else. As such, Directors have level "10" security clearance, an astonishing rare clearance that only seven other beings in the galaxy have: General Dragovich, Fleet Admiral Ashdown, Admiral Ishigami, General Hernandez, Admiral Lasky, Thel 'Vadam, and 'Rtas 'Vadam.

****URSC Security Clearance****: The URSC, in contrast to the UNSC, does not use a clearance classification system of "Confidential", "Secret", and "Top Secret". Instead, they used clearance levels, from one through ten, with one being the lowest and ten being the highest. The vast majority of the URSC military operatives had levels 1-4, depending on duties and Military Occupation Specialty (MOS). Logically, as a soldier ranks up within certain positions, they gained access to more information, and frequently, more power and influence. However, rank and clearance level was not always correlated, as an ensign fresh from Luna Academy heading into the intelligence field could be level 7 right from the get go, depending on merit, class rank, and other miscellaneous factors, while your average Colonel of a standard Marine Infantry division may have a level of 5, possibly less depending on circumstances.

At the top of the clearance was level "10". Outside of being the Director of the URSC, Minister of Defense, Commander of the Office of

Strategic Intelligence, and being at the highest rank of your perspective branch, by law, it is completely impossible to obtain such a clearance. The Director of the USG and Minister of Defense have "Alpha" and "Omega" clearance, respectively, which means, in layman's terms, they are privy to, quite literally, ALL of the URSC's secrets. Deliberately redacting and classifying a document not meant to be read by the Director or Minister of Defense is a capital crime punishable by life in prison or even execution if severe enough.

****Sangheili****: The Sangheili's relationship with the USG isâ€¦complex, to say the least. The Sangheili are not technically under the USG's jurisdiction, however, they are a formally apart of the URSC military, following its doctrines. Sangheili ships protect the inner colonies, Arcturus, Earth, while the URSC focuses more on expansion and exploration. Sangheili still use their ranking system, but will generally still follow the orders of those higher in rank in the URSC. As one scholar put it, "The Sangheili is independently dependent on the URSC and humanity as a whole."

****Type-4 Fusion Grenade****: The fusion grenade uses a 'slow burn' plasma detonation to produce a wide area burning effect, melting through armor, equipment and people. This allows it to be used as an anti-materiel grenade, destroying vulnerable systems, or immobilizing armor. The grenade's adhesive properties have been modified so it can stick to any structure, allowing it to be applied to stationary weapons, ammunition stores, fuel supplies or stationary vehicles.

12. Pounding the Pavement Dawn of an Era

****Mass Effect: The New Journey****

****Chapter Twelve: **Pounding the Pavement; Dawn of an Era**

Here we are! The swift end to the URSC-Batarian War! Hope you enjoy it!

This chapter was supposed to be longer and releasing midway into March, but I cut out a lot of things in this chapter, because, ultimately speaking, it was unnecessary fluff, that would be ultimately pointless in the long run. Sorry this chapter is much, shorter than the last one.

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><p>Khar'Shan

****Underground Bunker****

****Codename: Kite's Crest****

Deep underground in a classified location on Khar'shan which was

currently under siege in what had to be the single largest invasion fleet the galaxy had ever seen, except, perhaps, during the major battles of the Krogan Rebellions, the Grand Vizier of the Batarian Hegemony Jath'Amon was observing the war front with his advisors. He knew it, his generals knew it, and likely the civilians knew the uncomfortable truth: Khar'shan was going to fall. Likely in a matter of days, rather than weeks, thanks to their invaders stacked strategy, which its brilliance laid in the simplicity of it. First the URSC had dominated in space and lost barely 13% of their ships, then they had established air superiority in the atmosphere of Khar'shan, and finally began the ground invasion. There was the occasional dogfight between fighters who had missed the initial bombing, but for the most part, the entire Hegemony Air Force had been wiped out within the opening hours of the war!

Worse, when the ground soldiers came, it was a near slaughter. The invasion of Zestiria had drained the Hegemony of its professional force by a considerable margin, and thus a good many of the soldiers in uniform may as well have been militia men with their limited training and experience. The URSC was better equipped, inarguably better trained, and were supported by a logistical supply line that was awe-inspiring. Every few hours it seemed a fresh batch of troops by the tens of thousands would land on the planet, keen on taking their pound of flesh, and it was working.

The only two things had let them last this long were the deliberate mixing of the slave population and their numbers, but in the end, they weren't being halted, only being slowed down, if barely.

"Dammit! How the hell did they land so many troops?" Jath'Amon roared, his ire shaking the entire room.

"My Liege, a thousand apologies but we just couldn't predict the sheerâ€" "

"You morons! Do you have any idea what this invasion will do for the safety and standing of the Hegemony in the galaxy?! We'll be vulnerable for any of the Citadel races to openly defy us!" Of course, the irony was lost on him, considering he and Admiral Tarkus had caused this mess in the first place.

"Sirâ€" | I think we need to start considering other optionsâ€" | "

"What other options are there?"

"We could use our nuclearâ€" "

"Are you mad? You want us to nuke our own homeworld? If the situation weren't so desperate, I'd kill you right now on the spot!" Amon had growled, his contempt was showing.

"Sir! The Palace is being breached! They're going after the High Chancellor!" Simultaneously, the bunker had shaken greatly nearly knocking the Grand Vizier off his feet.

"_My liege! The humans have breeched our bunker! Weâ€" "Devils! I repeat we have DEVILS! Get to coverâ€" " _

_The transmission went dead. _

Everyone inside the bunker felt a shiver go down their spines. That said, they swallowed their fear and prepared to defend this bunker with their lives. Like Admiral Tarkus, they were patriots to the core and would die defending their homeworld from their invaders.

* * *

><p>Khar'Shan
**

URSC-Batarian War

February 27***th*****, 2168 **

**Vi'ran **

John-117 was panting, keeping his distance, the unfamiliar feeling of fatigue sitting in, for the first time in literally, decades. His armor was dented, had multiple lash wounds, and his visor was cracked on the side, and he was bleeding from the lip. Cortana had warned him. He had acknowledged it, wholeheartedly. Yet, despite that, even he was having a hard time comprehending just how tough his battle with the Turian had gotten. The only person who had ever injured him to this extent was Tenu and Fred, whenever they had sparred seriously.

That wasn't to say the Master Chief didn't take his pound of flesh. On the contrary, one could argue that Saren's injuries were indeed worse than the SPARTAN-II's, seeing as how his left mandibles were missing, the left side of his body was dented like John's (a side effect of being mostly mechanical), his right eye was bleeding partially blinding the HUNTER, stab wounds to the chest, a in-the-process-of-failing artificial lung, along with a barely functioning left arm. At best, it would take weeks to completely repair the damages John had dished out, and at worst, months depending on if he came out alive!

John had long since run out of spare magazines for his assault rifle. Not that it mattered even if he had some more; Saren had used his ARC blades to slice it in twain a good while ago. The tactic had saved the Chief's life, but at the cost of his primary weapon. In response, Saren had discarded his own Phaeston himself, engaging the Chief in hand-to-hand combat.

It seems these Turians have honor despite their arrogant demeanor, Chief thought as he studied Saren carefully, for even the slightest twitch, and the Turian was doing the same. He didn't disappoint, as he dashed forward with his biotics to do a charge. John, in pure reflex, brought up a hard light shield, stopping the Turian, who had pushed him back, just the slightest bit. Saren's biotics died down, and Chief used his jetpack boosters to push forward, knocking the Turian back. John jumped three meters into the air, clenched his fists and executed a ground pound, but Saren swiftly rolled out of the way. There was plenty of debris as the concrete cracked from the powerful melee attack.

Saren flicked his wrist to summon a smaller ARC blade, an ARC Dagger, the size of a URSC standard-issue Combat Knife, and held it reverse blade style. John quickly engaged the HUNTER again in hand-to-hand, blocking and dodging Saren's extremely swift and deadly blows as best

as he could. He cursed the fact that his armor's hard light blade didn't go any shorter or he hadn't had a hard light combat knife like Fred used. Using the full length against the smaller ARC blade with an opponent of Saren's skills would be a fatal mistake for reasons that should be obvious. Dodging a swing, the Master Chief counterattacked with a backhand to the face, temporarily disorientating him. Not wasting time, he side kicked him with a blow powerful enough to send him flying into a Mako, denting the vehicle, noticeably. A powerful crack followed this to the throat, courtesy of the Master Chief's kneecap, aided with momentum from his boosters. Saren coughed up blood, but he quickly reengaged, ignoring the copious amounts of pain as he was taught to from the ripe ol' age of eight years old. Both went at each other blow for blow, with John grabbing Saren's arm and flipping him over his entire body and slamming him to the ground. Pieces of metal chipped away from Renegade's leader's armor. Not one to be bested so easily, Saren stood up quickly crossed both his arms blocking a blow from the Chief and parried both of John's arms away and quickly grabbed him by his neck, for a split second holding him in mid-air. With not much time to plan his next attack, Saren, aided with his augmented strength and biotics, tossed the Chief over the Mako with raw physical strength, with him landing on the other side on his back. Taking a page from John's earlier tactic, Saren jumped up and went for a final strike.

"John! Watch out!" Cortana warned, worriedly. She had tried her best to keep quiet, as to let John concentrate on defeating the Turian, but the longer this went on, the more difficult she was finding it!

"I know!" John replied, tersely, rolling out of the way and getting to his feet. Saren had kicked him back into an abandoned Mako vehicle, also causing visible damage to it. He summoned another ARC Dagger and did a vertical stabbing motion. Master Chief crossed his arms to block the blade from entering his cranium and moved his head to the left and relaxed his arm muscles which stopped resisting. As predicted, the blade had imbedded itself in the Mako, its properties cutting into the vehicle like butter, but Saren had dragged the Chief down the vehicle with it still embedded, leaving an extended laceration mark. With a quick jab from John's knee, Saren was pushed back, just enough to give John an opening. He tackled him to the ground, but the HUNTER was prepared and shifted his weight in mid-air ever so slightly, to where John would take most of the blow. Thinking quickly, John used his jet pack to boost out of the way the moment he was slammed to dodge an execution with the full length ARC Blade that embedded itself into the concrete. He put more distance between the HUNTER to get a chance to reevaluate his tactics and then launch a counterattack.

Saren actually gave a genuine smile and wiped some blood from his mouth, finally cleaning up after a small break in their short battle. "So, it seems I was mistaken to believe that you would go down easily. Such arrogance should be beneath me," he told the Spartan, genuinely apologetic. "You are indeed a worthy opponent."

"Likewise," John replied, simply. The feeling of respect was mutual. The Master Chief hadn't gone all out in a life-or-death setting in probably _decades_. He had nearly forgotten what that was like until now.

"I'm sure you're angry about your comrades. Believe me, I had no choice. I was simply following orders. It was nothing personal," Saren explained without preamble. ." In all honestly, Saren honestly didn't _want_ to engage the SPARTAN-IVs, but his orders had changed once he had informed the General of their super human feats on a secure channel. They couldn't leave Khar'shan without knowing how the best HUNTER unit stacked up against the Human super soldiers.

Keeping his guard up, in case the chatter was meant to distract him, John asked, "Then why are you here?"

"To observe you," Saren replied simply. "All potential threats to the Council must be taken seriously."

"We are only here because the Batarians attacked one of our allies," John responded. "We pose no threat to your Council," he argued. "Neither did the Sangheili you killed, either." While the Commander was sure there would be _some_ Sangheili in the Empire who would, rightly so, be enraged at their comrades death by the hands of the Turians, by and large, they were rational beings, even if a bit hotheaded at times. If anything, they'd be smart enough to use the HUNTERS killing of their citizens as covert political leverage; which considering present circumstances, would bring far, FAR more long-term rewards than an eye-for-eye with the added benefit of no bloodshed. It wasn't like the Turians had invaded a Sangheili colony and committed mass murder like the Batarians, necessitating a swift and large retaliation; had that been the case, it'd be a completely different story. This, however, _barely_ qualified for a scuffle, as hardly thirty Sangheili were among the dead. A counterattack was an ****extremely**** unnecessary idea to the point of even _suggesting_ it was sheer insanity _at best_, and outright idiotic at worst. They would be forced with far more ****immediate**** pressing concerns after the war concluded, and frankly, the HUNTERS would be near the bottom of the list.

"That may be true," Saren conceded, with regretful distaste. "It's a shame. I would've enjoyed sparring you indefinitely in these times of peace. Butâ€¦I was taught from birth to follow orders as deemed by my superiors. I must defeat you at all cost, for it is my _duty_ to do so."

"You can try," John challenged. Saren mandibles curved into a small smirk and he activated his lash, the whips swirling with biotic energy. He dashed towards the Master Chief, keen on winning this battle between two titans!

* * *

><p>While Saren was facing Humanity's Champion, Frederic-104 had the pleasure, or displeasure depending on your perspective, of facing both Kryses and Nihlus _simultaneously_. In short, he was barely holding his own, with his eight decade-plus of experience and tech advantage being his saving grace. But, like all things related to warfare, experience may have been ****a**** factor, but at the end of day, it wasn't always the end-all be-all. If that were the case, the Asari would be the dominant military power in the galaxy over the Turians by orders of magnitude, yet, they weren't. The Covenant had experience in space warfare long before the _concepts_ of nations

existed on Earth, yet the UNSC still managed to pull a pyrrhic victory. That's why Blue-Team as a whole, Fred in particular, taught the OMEGA during their training on ARCHON to absolutely never underestimate enemies, even the Batarians with their notably inferior weaponry and starships.

If his own species was able to hold out against an enemy who was light years beyond Humanity, at the time, technologically, in everyway imaginable, who's to say other species couldn't do the same at some point in the future if it really came down to it? To assume otherwise would make the Spartan feel like a hypocrite, holding aliens to a double standard and humanity as being a "special case". The Forerunners and Covenant had let their technological advantage turn into arrogance and they paid the price for it. Why and more importantly, how, would or even COULD humanity be different, especially considering human nature and human history had proven pride always came before the fall countless numbers of times? Because of the Mantle? The Forerunners had held it and they still collapsed. Humans may have had unique attributes, like all species, but there was **nothing** about them that was inherently special or superior. Such thinking was reserved for racists and bigots. Humanity had coined the terms "victory disease" and "underdog" for a reason.

Like the Renegade leader, it seemed the HUNTERS he was facing had a preference for hand-to-hand or melee-based combat. Fred was more than happy to oblige pulling out his two custom made hard light combat knives, his specialty. The larger Turian was physically stronger than he was (which was no surprise considering that Fred was physically smaller than him by two whole feet and probably a couple hundred kilograms to boot), with the other being more or less his equal. He'd have to be careful; just as they had little intimate knowledge of Spartans; he too had little knowledge of them.

"Let's dance," Fred challenged, flipping his combat knives in reverse blade. With impressive running speed, Fred dashed towards the HUNTERS, keen on taking both out. Nihlus engaged him first, after donning tech armor. He had activated dual Arc Daggers. Fred had reached top speed and executed a Spartan Charge knocking the HUNTER back a solid thirty feet. Nihlus barely recovered, as otherwise he would've landed unceremoniously.

Fred, not one to waste time, used his thruster pack to cover more ground quickly, but Kryses had used his opportunity to intercept him mid way to grab him by the legs, lifting him up over his head, only to slam him to the asphalt, cracking it considerably. With a feral satisfied grin, Kryses used all of his might to kick the SPARTAN-II toward Nihlus. The XO smirked and brought out his full length ARC Blade was intending on executing the super soldier. He didn't get the chance: Fred had activated a hard light shield, preventing said blades from piercing him. He sliced through the armor of the HUNTER easily enough with a few quick stabs, with Nihlus crying out in pain. He was about to finish him, but Nihlus had redeployed his tech armor and stopped him. He boosted back in surprise, but Kryses had already engaged him again, the large Turian had tackled him to the ground, his monstrous strength tearing up the street almost as if it were sheet rock. Nihlus had already joined the fray and Fred felt his claws wrap around his throat, while Kryses held him down.

Fred could feel the air leaving his lungs as he fought with all his

might, to no avail, the combined strength of the two Turians dwarfed him, considerably. His mind was racing as a plan came to him suddenly, as he saw all that he needed with a quick scan of the battlefield using VISR 6.0.

"You were a worthy opponent, human," Kryses praised. "Let it be known it was an honor, but predictable outcome nonetheless. We were trained our entire lives to face threats like you."

That was when Fred saw his chance, as he felt Nihlus just slightly release some of the pressure as the Turian had subconsciously done, nodding in agreement with Kryses. That was all he needed, he overcharged his energy shields, sending a jolt to both Turians that visibly shattered their Omnicore Shielding like glass. Seizing his hard light knife that he had dropped nearby, Nihlus was pierced at the clavicle, almost at the neck. It didn't kill the HUNTER immediately, but he instinctively had released the SPARTAN he had nearly asphyxiated to death. He kicked Nihlus away inside a building, shattering glass and seemingly knocking him unconscious. After scooping up an AA-48 Shotgun that was lying on the ground near a dead TDST operative, Kryses was kneed in the face still trying his best to recover from Fred's unexpected tactic. His shielding had been damaged to the extent that he would need to be repaired at NOVA-6.

"And **that's** why you two have lost. We OMEGA are trained to face the unknown." He raised his Shotgun and blew the Turian HUNTER's head clean off, and to make sure, emptied the entire clip into the corpse, with the body twitching with every shot. He paused, almost expecting the HUNTER to magically somehow resurrect himself.

He didn't. The HUNTER was dead. As a failsafe, the HUNTER's corpse had dissolved with a very powerful blue colored acid, leaving little, if any, trace of the HUNTER. No autopsy could be performed, now.

Grimacing, Fred was careful not to get any of the acid on himself and then reloaded the shotgun with one spare drum magazine he had on his person, and sat out to find Nihlus and finish him off. He leapt inside the edifice that he had kicked the Turian in to findâ€|nothing. Grunting, he activated Promethean Vision to scan the area for the super soldier. Again, he found the building to be completely deserted outside of some Sangheili corpses. Nihlus was gone, no doubt about it. **How**, exactly, Fred was unsure, but, for now, he had to be content with that he had managed to take out the large HUNTER and fatally (he hoped) wound the other. He quickly scouted for extra ammunition and would help either John or Kelly, depending on the situation.

* * *

><p>Silvari was angry. No, scratch that. Saying she was "angry" couldn't even *begin* to describe the sheer rage that was swelling up within her. She was absolutely furios. Outside of several HUNTERS she could count on a single hand, no one had been able to keep up with her speed. Her feats of swiftness had left even the likes of Dr. Ruyio flummoxed in bewilderment, surpassing expectations. She was confident that no sapient soldier could ever keep up with her: until now. Kelly-087 had been keeping up with the Turian HUNTER, aided by both MJOLNIR XII and her natural speed. The fact that this Spirits-damned Human could equal was an insult she

took very, very personally.

"I'm going to kill you, human. Now, out of sheer principle," she vowed, glaring at the female SPARTAN-II.

Kelly didn't reply, but felt a little unease. Not even John could keep up with her, and now she had finally met a match worthy of her going all out. Without warning or preamble, Silviri engaged Kelly again, with her shotgun pumping as many shells as she could downrange. The shells tagged Kelly's energy shields depleting them about a quarter, before she rolled into cover, behind a pillar of a stone gazebo. Her motion sensor had detected Silviri behind her and she ducked, narrowly escaping from being sliced in twain by the ARC blade. Silviri had cut through the pillar with extreme ease causing the gazebo to collapse in on itself. Absentmindedly, Silviri put a barrier over herself, as the falling stone didn't phase her armor or shields.

Kelly regained her footing and shot at the Hunter a multitude of times, pressing the trigger at speeds no normal human could ever hope to achieve. She had succeeded in knocking out her barrier and depleting half of her shields. Kelly had reloaded swiftly, able to reach for a spare magazine and cock the pistol in literally in a quarter of a second, and then continued her assault to keep the Cabal on the defensive. Even Silviri had to recoil in shock. Even though her nervous system was entirely synthetic, not even she could reload a thermal clip that fast. A warning tone in her HUD had indicated that the SPARTAN-II had fully depleted her defenses: her Omnicore Shields had been breached. Silviri yelped in pain as five 12.7x40mm hybrid rounds from the M7A Magnum breached her armor. Her lungs were burning, and what tissue that was living felt like it was on fire due to the plasma. The Cabal roared, in sheer rage, nearly losing sight of rationality.

Kelly, unfortunately had to reload and reached for another magazine, but Silviri had executed an exceptionally powerful throw and hurled Kelly like ragdoll, hurling her into another edifice with enough force to cause a spider web crack in the wall. Were Kelly not augmented and had protective plating of MJOLNIR, she would've been turned to paste, easily.

Silviri didn't let up as her rage fully took over, going berserk. She executed a singularity and Kelly, despite her speed, wasn't able to fully dodge the biotic attack, still feeling the disorientation from the powerful throw. It had caught her left arm. Kelly's eyes widened and Silviri gave her a cruel smirk. She closed her fist to close the singularity, along with the SPARTAN-II's arm.

Kelly had cried out in agony. The biotic attack had crumpled her once left like paper, crushing it completely to the point that whatever was left would assuredly have to be amputated. Even Spartans could go into shock, as 087's helmet retracted revealing her human face, she started to spasm uncontrollably. Silviri was about to finish the vulnerable SPARTAN-II off, before her shields flared again. She turned her attention to see Fred laying down suppressive fire pushing her back.

"Don't you dare interfere with my prey!" Silviri roared in rage. She was about to perform a biotic charge before her eyes widened and turned her attention upwards. A ship, black as the night and the size

of a frigate hovered over the HUNTER. It was the _Black Zero_, a prototype stealth vessel used by the Turians to covertly deploy the HUNTERS anywhere in the galaxy. Fred had deployed hard light cover to protect Kelly and himself from the suppressive fire coming from the frigate.

"We're retreating, Silviri. Disengage," Saren growled as he appeared suddenly. Silviri's eyes widened again, in shock. Renegade's leader _was missing his entire left arm_. While she had crushed Kelly's arm with her biotics, Saren's arm appeared as if it had been, literally_, ripped from its sockets_ as mechanical fluid along with blood had been dripping from the base, along with numerous stab wounds and injuries.

"What of the others?" she asked quickly asked.

"Kryses is dead, Nihlus is barely hanging on in the medical bay, and Garrus has half of his face missing," Saren reported. "Come. We must leave. Now. This battle is lost." Silviri reluctantly nodded and used her powerful leg muscles to jump dozens of meters in the air to the open hangar doors.

"This victory belongs to you, Humans. Enjoy it. If we meet again, I promise you its outcome will not be in your favor," Saren vowed, with a modicum of genuine respect for Blue-Team's Pyrrhic victory. He jumped up toward the _Black Zero_ and it vanished from view using a ship based version of the HUNTER's Tactical Cloak ability and revved up its engines, keen on leaving Khar'shan. The Zero left Vi'Ran without a second thought

"Kelly! Kelly! Hang on!" Fred shouted he tried to treat the female Spartan to stop her body from spazzing out uncontrollably. A quick application of medigel to the affected area seemed to calm her jitters.

"You okay?" Fred asked, concern noted in his voice.

Kelly blinked several times. "Yeahâ€¦" she groaned, trying to move her left arm, but found she couldn't feel it anymore.

"Myâ€¦"

"I'm sorry, Kelly. That Turian nearly killed you. You're lucky your arm is the only thing you lost."

"Blue-Team, status report," came the voice of John, over TEAMCOM.

"I'm green, sir," Fred replied. "A few bruises here and there, but I can still fight. Kelly is out of commission. No way she's going to be able to fight in the war."

"I see, neither will I," John reported gravely, to Fred's surprise. "Linda, come in."

There was silence.

"Sierra Zero-Five-Eight, respond," John had ordered outright this time, his voice almost _cracking_.

There was still nothing.

"Sierra Zero-Five-Eight if you can hear this transmission, respond!"

"Thiâ€|Sierraâ€|. " Linda had managed to wheeze out over the COM, coughing uncontrollably. She was up against a tree, barely clinging to life, wounded and bleeding profusely with her helmet retracted in her suit. The sniper had a standoff and battle of wits with one of the Turian HUNTERS, its marksman. She had managed to wound him, but it seemed fate had been on his side as he was able to cause significant damage in reprisal. Whatever sniper caliber hit her, it was assuredly a prototype of some kind, seeing as how Batarian snipers in the S.T.R.I.K.E units didn't have sniper rifles nowhere near this powerful. The HUNTER's injuries from their previous engagement prevented him from finishing her off, as he was missing practically half his face, and his cybernetics, apparently, weren't sufficient enough to compensate. If someone were to ask her who was the better marksman, Linda would honestly reply: she didn't know. Any "gap" in skill between the two was so small, that it was statistically insignificant at best and any future engagements could literally go either way, basically boiling down to sheer fate.

"Hold on, Linda," Cortana spoke to the SPARTAN-II. "I've diverted a Pegasus to pick you up, priority Alpha." Colonel Greystone had ordered as many Pegasus dropships as he could to help the Spartans out and exfil any wounded.

Linda's vision was blurry, going in and out. She could see the Pegasus descend as fast it could without disturbing the environment. Marines and TDST had hopped off the dropship sprinting towards the "OMEGA". Men were barking orders indistinctively as she struggled to stay conscious. It took twelve men, but they were able to lift the heavy soldier on a stretcher and seal her wounds with medigel to stop the immediate external bleeding. She wasn't out of the woods yet. Far from it, in fact. The FOB didn't have a hospital even remotely advanced enough to treat wounds for a SPARTAN. She needed to go the Dawn of an Era for proper treatment. No longer able to keep her eyes open, Linda allowed herself to drift into a dreamless sleep, silently praying that she'd wake up in a hospital bed at the very least. If notâ€|wellâ€|she had served humanity well.

The Pegasus raced as fast as it could to the OMEGA ships' mobile HQ in geosynchronous orbit.

* * *

><p>URSC **Dawn of an Era**

****OMEGA HQ, Medical Bay, 11 -Hours Later****

****February 28****th****, 2168****

John-117 had slowly parted his eyes, awakening from his slumber. The bright hospital lights had blinded him for a split second, before his augmented eyes instantly adjusted to the brightness. He was only in his underwear in the hospital and his armor was neatly tucked away in the corner along with the black under suit.

"Morning sunshine," Cortana chimed in, her avatar appearing beside

his bed.

John sat up. "How long have Iâ€" "

"Nine hours," Cortana replied swiftly, expecting his question.

"What about the others?"

Cortana frowned, and then sighed. "The good news is that they're alive and Fred is fine, only a few cuts and bruises. Bad news is, Kelly and Linda are going to be out of commission for a good while. Kelly needs to have an arm flash cloned and then augmented. That could take weeks, months in the worst-case scenario. Linda had to have surgery. She's going to be okay, but she'll need to take it easy. So do you," Cortana told him, tilting her head. "When that Turian had pierced you with those blades, I thought you were deadâ€"but it seems luck always seems to favor you."

"So it does," John retorted simply. There was a pregnant silence. "That Turianâ€"he was strong. He almost killed me."

"Don't remind me," Cortana dryly remarked with a frown. "Butâ€"even though he was strongâ€"you still won. Just like you always do," she smiled. John resisted the urge to grunt in disagreement. It sure as hell didn't "_feel_" like a win, especially when those Turians had put half of his team out of commission, along with ten Spartans dead. He really had grown to respect the IVs, especially Crimson and Majestic. Their presence would be missed.

"I'm sure you've analyzed our battle probably hundreds of times. What can you tell me about them?"

"Well, for one, I doubt their training was conventional, like your was," Cortana stated. John tilted his head, ever so slightly, asking her to elaborate. She did, "What I mean was that their tactics mainly revolved around attacking a close-range as a preference and using their augmentations, biotics, tech, whatever the case may be to get the upper-hand, being wild and unpredictable. Outside of the Turian who injured Linda, I can almost definitively say that Blue Team would be better with firearms, almost ludicrously so. Hand-to-hand...well, that's more of a hit-or-miss. Other than, that, your guess is as good as mine: the Codex has absolutely nothing about Turians and a super soldier program."

"So for all we know there could be thousands of them just as skilled, just as strong, potentially even stronger," John remarked, not liking that prospect.

"Maybe, but I highly doubt it. Those Turians were here for a reason: on a hostile planet invaded by an upcoming galactic superpower. Now pretend the reverse had happen. If you were Xavier, would you send an 'average', relatively speaking of course, run-of-the-mill, OMEGA unit to a hostile alien world being invaded by an alien civilization for covert activities?" The question was semi-rhetorical in nature.

John seemed amused. "I suppose you're right."

"Of course," Cortana mused. "When haven't I been?"

"Do you really want me to answer that?" John teased her, causing

her to fluster in embarrassment. She jerked up.

"Incoming transmission!"

The hospital room had darkened considerably, and John's eyes had once again easily adjusted to the lack of light. A holographic projection of Director Miles Andre Xavier appeared, his arms crossed behind his back.

John sharply saluted his superior. "Director, sir!"

Xavier had saluted back. "At ease, Commander. You've been through a lot over the past few days. No need for you to be so formal." He then sighed and began again, "I heard you lost a few Spartans." John was glad this line was secure. The top brass of the URSC and a handful of crewman who may or may not be alive were still one of the privileged few to know the truth about humanity's advancement into the stars.

"Not from my team, sir, Majestic and Crimson," John corrected.

"From your Fourth-Generation?"

"Yes, sir."

"I see. You have my condolences, Commander," Xavier told him sympathetically.

"It's all right, sir. I'm used to it." Of course, that was a bold face lie and Cortana knew it the moment it left his lips. Xavier, frankly, did too. Neither of them called him out on it.

"So you are," Xavier replied neutrally. "However, I'm going to make the assumption OPERATION WATCH GLASS a success?"

"Without any complications, sir."

"Excellent. You should know that Fireteam ARCLIGHT performed wonderfully and executed their mission flawlessly. We have apprehended the Troiska and we are proceeding to Phase Three," he informed. Xavier couldn't see it, but John's lips curved upward ever so slightly, as he was proud of his protégés. They were really growing on their own. "In the next few hours this war is going to be over."

"Glad to hear it, sir."

"In the meantime, I'm placing Blue Team on indefinite convalescent leave, until you four are back to full combat capability, which means you'll be out of the field. These Turians—they're classified level 9. I've already debriefed Colonel Greystone and the other TDST you saved. Outside of other Spartans and OMEGA, no one is allowed to know about them."

"What about the Arbiter?"

"I'll handle that myself," the Director assured. "We'll take care of everything on our end. You and the rest of your team need to get some well-deserved R&R. Yes, that is an order."

"Understood, and thank you, sir."

Xavier nodded and turned around to walk away. His hologram vanished with a shimmering effect with every few steps, leaving the Master Chief alone with his thoughts.

* * *

><p>URSC Midnight Sun

February 28th, 2168

1400 Hours, USG Standard Time

Inside the interrogation room, Jath'Amon and Grothan Pazness felt the familiar jolt, awakening them in an instant. The Grand Vizier and High Chancellor were strapped to chairs and couldn't move.

"Nice of you to join me," Admiral Tarkus sneered at the troiska.

Grothan glared irately at the Batarian Admiral and Grand Vizier, both of whom were on either side of him. "Take a look. Both of you!" All around them in the room were screens of the URSC-Batarian War. Even without their leadership, the Batarian military was still fighting as valiantly as they could; keen on trying to repel the invaders. But they were being overwhelmed, slowly, but surely. Entire cities were on fire, slaves were being rescued and treated in hospitals, and there was pure chaos all across the planet as order had broke down. "Do you see what you've done?! You attacked a species without provocation to bring in more slaves," he spat the word slave in pure disgust. "And now do you see why our ways are archaic and we must change?!"

"We thoughtâ€"!" Jath tried to say, but he was interrupted.

"You thought?!" Pazness interjected furiously. "You THOUGHT?! YOU IDIOTS! Do you have any idea what the hell you've done?! Our entire homeworld, and likely our colonies are being burned, our government is being toppled and to make things worse, it was from your own actions!"

"You can't blame us!" Tarkus growled out. He despised this idealistic fool with a passion. "We had no idea that they would be so powerful or have alien allies!"

"You disgust me, Admiral Tarkus," Chancellor Grothan sneered, for the first time openly showing hostility to the Batarian admiral. The seething hatred the Admiral had for the Chancellor was entirely mutual. "Never one to take responsibility for your own actions, like a real leader would."

All four of Tarkus' eyes widened, taken aback. Never in his life had Tarkus wanted to kill someone so intimately before. "You littleâ€"!"

"Shut up, Tarkus," Jath growled. "Nothing you say now will change the situation at hand." Tarkus glared at the Batarian, but said nothing, following the Grand Vizier's so-called "order."

"Well, well, it seems the so called 'troiska' isn't as united as your propaganda wants your citizens to believe," Xavier smirked walking in the room, standing center stage, four meters away from them, arms cross behind his back as usual. Tarkus took note of the fact that this was indeed in-fact the _real_ Xavier, not a holographic projection as he was so used to. "Allow me to introduce myself, my name is Director Miles Andre Xavier, I am the leader of the United Races Space Command."

"So, you've finally come here personally?" Tarkus noted calmly, while the other two were confused, understandably so.

"Of course. _You_ made this personal the moment you destroyed Kastella. We're still cleaning up the fallout."

Chancellor Grothan's eyes widened in shock, while the Grand Vizier and Admiral were stoic if a bit amused. "You two authorized the use of a NUKE?! If the Council had found outâ€"!"

"Your Citadel Council should be the _least_ of your concerns. You should be worried about what _I'm going to do to you_," he said coldly. "See, interesting fact about you Batarians. Despite the fact that you three are here, your military is still fighting valiantly, hell in some cases even fanatically. Your devotion isâ€|.respectable. However, with the three of you here, if you say the word, you can end this conflict by ordering them all to surrender. Once that happens, I will lift my take no prisoners mandate and we end this conflict without any more bloodshed."

"Will you leave us in peace?" the Chancellor asked hopeful. Maybe now he could pass certain legislation and reforms he had wanted since he came into office! This could be a chance for abolition that he had dreamed of since he was small boy!

Xavier gave him a dark chuckle. "Leave you in peace? Oh, no. No, no, no. Chancellor, your species attacked one of our allies, killed millions of our civilians, and to top it off, you used a WMD, which, according to your laws, is expressly illegal, unprovoked. No, we will not leave you in peace. You will be punished and we will make sure no sapient being will ever be enslaved by the Batarian Hegemony. _Permanently_."

"Then we will resist! Our heritage will beâ€"!"

"Scattered to the wind," Xavier interrupted. "You _will_ comply, forcefully, if we have too. Your government will no longer and enslave anyone, Batarians included."

"Butâ€|how?!" Tarkus questioned. "There's no way you could force such a cultural change unless..." The Admiral trailed off as his jaw dropped in sheer horror. "An occupation?!"

Xavier smirked, impressed at the Admiral's insightfulness. "Not just any occupation. When I said your punishment would be long-term, I _meant it_. When you surrender and this war ends, I will give an executive order to move all of your citizens in your colonies to Khar'shan and effectively, put your _entire species_ on a planet-wide galactic scale version of house arrest."

"House arrest?" The Chancellor was obviously unfamiliar with the

human term.

"Effectively, it means the URSC is going to cut the Batarians off from the Galaxy. NONE of you will be allowed to leave your homeworld. We will make sure of that. Until we deem you fit for a probation and fit to return to galactic society, so to speak, you will be confined here on this planet, under our watchful eye and never be allowed to leave."

"YOU BASTARD!" the Grand Vizier roared in anger. "You would essentially be enslaving us! You hypocrite!"

Xavier rolled his eyes. "This is a military occupation, NOT an enslavement, you imbecile. If you cannot recognize the difference, then you're more of an idiot than you let on. Now, as I was going to say: We're going to take a page from our history books and apply what the USA did to Japan and Germany, after we fought a war against them."

"Thisâ€¦Japanâ€¦" the Chancellor started, assuming the word was referring to some kind of state or colony. "You treated them humanely, yes?" He was taking the prospect remarkably well, considering. Although he had asked for leniency and peace, truthfully, he knew an occupation force was probably the most likely outcome of their very short one-sided war. Grothan was a rational being: he knew they had no leverage whatsoever, it was better to play by their rules, instead of fighting a losing battle.

"Chancellor! How could you be humoring thisâ€¦"

"BE SILENT!" the High Chancellor roared, shutting both of the Batarians up with Xavier raising both eyebrow. "Nowâ€¦my questionâ€¦human."

The Director nodded. "Yes. We did. The two countries had did some pretty despicable things, arguably even worse than what you two sanctioned," he argued. "Even still, instead of conquering them, we did something practically unprecedented in our history. The USA had rebuilt their country, rebuilt their economies, and turned their culture away from the violence that had lead up to the conflict. In time, ironically enough, we had turned our once greatest enemies into one of our greatest allies, both militarily and economically, more so the latter. I wish to do the same here. We will rebuild your planet from the ground up, to fix the devastation that we have caused in the past week. Your children will grow up in post-abolition world, taught values of respect, honor, courage, freedom, integrity, leadership, merit, hard work, and the like. We will show them the history of your people, but we will also show them how you can progress and move forward, forgiving, but never forgetting. In timeâ€¦we will forge a stable partnership, as we give more and more freedom back to civilian leadership, independent of say a military governor. Who knows, maybe in half-a-century, after the wounds and animosity heals, I could even see the Batarians becoming a full-fledged member of the Unified Species Government and possibly decades before then allowing some of your citizens to join the United Races Space Command Defense Forceâ€¦with heavy supervision of course to make sure their loyalty isn't in question. I once told your Admiral that I saw great potential in the Batarians and I was sincere from the bottom of my heart. We will now be molding that potential for something that can be used other than thievery, nepotism, slavery, and endless

corruption. However, Troiska, do not mistake my kind words of compassion for weakness; your species will **never** be independent again. Not unless some catastrophic event happens centuries from now."

"What if we refuse?!"

"Then I simply call my invasion fleet back and we destroy your homeworld and colonies outright," Xavier replied bluntly, with a straight face. Of course, he was lying through his teeth. There was no possible way that the USG's citizens would tolerate him ordering a planet reduced to molten rock. He'd be thrown out of office. However, they didn't need to know thatâ€|

"! You couldn't! There's no way you could! You're bluffing, human! You wouldn't dare make such baseless threats!"

"The word 'threat' implies an inherent possibility that there exists a chance that I won't follow through or you won't end up regretting defying me. Neither option exists for you," he stated coldly and snapped his fingers. All of the screens in the room showing various theaters of the invasion suddenly went black and a singular image of a planet appeared. In Geosynchronous orbit there was a single URSC dreadnought, the **Beautiful Annihilation**.

"That's Adek!" The Grand Vizier cried out in sheer horror. It was easily one of their most populated colonies!

"Indeed, it is," Xavier confirmed, before pressing icons on a nearby wall, bringing up the holographic image of a black crystal. "Does either of you three know what this is?" Their silence spoke volumes. "Thisâ€|is Daxite. Easily one of the rarest substances in the galaxy. See, the URSC has been trying for decades to build a planet killer, unsuccessfully. This all changed when we discovered this. It's quite a marvel. Run an electrical charge through one pound of this and bam! You get an explosion large enough to take out an entire skyscraper. Nowâ€|I wonderâ€|what would happen if I dropped a warhead filled with 2500 kilograms of it on, Adek? Hmm?"

"NO!" the High Chancellor shook his head. "Don't do it! We'll, surrender to your terms. Just please! Spare my people."

Director Xavier shook his head. "No, not unless all three of you surrender. "

"You're bluffing! No one would be so callous and cruel! The entire galaxy would despise you for such an action. You're entire species would hate you!"

"Is that so?"

"You fool, Tarkus! Let us go out with some dignity at the very least!"

"Never!" Tarkus stubbornly rebuked.

"A shame," Xavier shook his head. "This is Director Xavier calling the Beautiful Annihilation." _

There was silence before a female voice answered. "This is Rear

Admiral Shepard, what can I do for you, sir?"

"Take us into a New Dawn," Xavier had told her. Shepard had nodded.

"Understood, Director. Access codes?"

"Director's Override Alpha and Omega protocol: India, Sierra, Hotel, India, Golf, Alpha, Mike, India," he called out, stoically.

"One momentâ€¦.codes accepted."

"Both of you please! You know what they're capable of! Please I beg of you!" If Grothan could get on his knees and beg he would've done so in a heartbeat. He was terrified.

"All URSC ships, disengage," Rear-Admiral Shepard had ordered and the ships in the system vanished into slipspace, their destinations unknown. Inside the Annihilation's missile bay, the Daxite warhead was armed. The bomb was enormous, easily the size of an ICBM.

"I can easily call her off now, should you surrender," Xavier reminded them. "You can stop this at anytime."

For once in his life, Tarkus was faced with a dilemma. He could take a gamble that the Human was bluffing, but what, in the off chance he wasn't? Adek would be destroyed and millions of citizens would die. Could he take that risk? What would a patriot do? Could a patriot gamble the lives of the citizens he had sworn to protect? True, he was pro-slavery, but it was much more nuanced and complex than that! It was there way of life and heritage. His life had known nothing else, except that. But that heritage meant nothing if the humans could turn their planets into space dust. The Admiral could barely stop the tears of rage and humiliation from rolling down his face.

"Fine," he growled out, making his decision with a pained and heavy heart. "You win, human. We will surrender to your terms."

Xavier smirked, almost laughing. He played him like a fiddle. In truth he was going to drop the bomb, but only on Klos, a planet in the system that didn't have an atmosphere, to prove that the warhead's destructive power was real, but it seemed as if he wouldn't have to use that option.

"Excellent choice!" Xavier praised. "Now, speak to all of your forces, give them the code to surrender and lay down their arms. I vow no harm will come to them."

High Chancellor Grothan breathed a sigh of relief; thankful the man had saw reason before it was too late. "I High Chancellor Grothan hereby order ALL Batarian Military units to stand down. Troiska."

"I, Grand Vizier, Jath'Amon also order all Batarian Units to Stand Down. Troiska"

There was a pregnant silence. Admiral Tarkus clenched his fists, swallowed his enormous pride, and said "Iâ€¦. Imperial Admiral Zolo Tarkus orderâ€¦you toâ€¦stand down." A pause. "Troiska."

Then all three of them simultaneously said. "Troiska val Fela, odes ashi mota."

The Three-Above-All, shall mote it be.

"Thank you gentlemen," he told them sincerely. "All URSC Forces, this is Director Xavier. All surrendering Batarian forces are to be apprehended and treated humanely and with dignity. Executive Mandate 21 is lifted. I repeat, Executive Mandate 21 is lifted. Any violation of this order by any personnel shall be punished under article VIII of the War Powers Act of 2120 and Article 20 the United Races Space Command Uniform Code of Military Justice."

Four URSC Marines had arrived in the room soon after, they had released the Grand Vizier and Admiral from the restraints, handcuffed them, and escorted them out of the room. Both Batarians were silent, too emotionally drained to even make a snide remark and simply let themselves be hauled off wherever they were ordered to go.

"Where are you taking them?" the High Chancellor asked, curious.

"To a jail cell. They will be tried in our courts, and subsequently when they're found guilty, they will be executed," Xavier informed him, nonchalantly.

Grothan had grimaced, uncomfortable. While he may have hated the two, never in his entire term had the idea of execution even crossed his mind, preferring diplomacy and talking, rather than brute force.

"I'm guessing you're probably wondering why you're not among them?"

Grothan nodded his head and asked, "And to ask youâ€|why are you doing this? Helping us after what we did? What you're doingâ€|it's literally unprecedented." It was the truth. None of the Council Races would've so much as lifted a finger to help the Batarians rebuild had the URSC simply just them be after defeating the soon-to-be ex slavers.

Xavier sighed. "I've read your file and history, Chancellor. Despite my rhetoric, I do genuinely believe you're a good man and you've been trying to do the right thing for years, only to be blocked time again by the opposition party in the Senate. You favor abolition and reopening the Embassy with the Citadel Council. I even know you treat the servants at the Palace with respect and dignity. So, with that in mind, I'm going to mold you into a voice the people can rally behind and let my military occupy the planet as peacefully as we can, with eventually making you the President when all is said and done."

Grothan frowned. "As much as I would like toâ€|you know there will be rebels and resistance, correct?"

Xavier nodded. "We're quite aware. They will be dealt with accordingly. The ones who simply protest peacefully will be allowed to do so, and those who take up armsâ€|.wellâ€|I'm sure you're aware of we'll do what we have to. Eventually, once the fruits of our labors start to be seen by the populace and they enjoy their new

freedom's any resistance will lose its support."

"And if they don't?"

"We'll cross that bridge if we come to it," Xavier vowed.

"I see," Grothan replied simply. "I hope you can live up to your promises."

"We are not a cruel collection of species, Chancellor. I'm not saying the occupation will be perfect, I'd be an idiot to believe otherwise, but trust me when I say I'm going to make the transition as painless as possible." Xavier wasn't a fool, by any stretch of the imagination. He had studied on the Allies occupation of the Axis powers directly after the Second World War with near religious zeal. How soldiers had gotten away with all sorts of crimes because the enemy had been dehumanized and treated with dirt that most wouldn't care. There was no way in hell he would let such soldiers go unpunished were they to do the same to Batarian civilians, especially women and children. Matias was already pitching ideas to combat the inevitable and was going to get back with him as soon as he could.

Xavier had snapped his fingers again and the Chancellor was released from his restraints. The Director walked up to the Batarian and held out his hand. "In the URSC we finish deals by shaking hands. I know we'll have to sign a formal surrender at a later date, but this will be the end of it here. You've always wanted to build a better society for the Batarians, right? That's why your subordinates trusted you. They believed in you. Now, you have a chance to fully change your society, as you always wanted. Today we can pound the pavement of a road to a better tomorrow."

The High Chancellor had looked towards the screens, which had, conveniently, switched to the perspective of the situation on the ground. Just as the troiska ordered, Batarian soldiers were laying down their arms and surrendering. The URSC soldiers were following their orders also, treating their enemy with as much grace as one could, considering the circumstances, even the Draxian and Caleans. They would have the moral high ground it seemed.

'_Father, I hope you can forgive me. But I cannot allow our species to continue on this destructive amoral path. We must repent. Centuries from now, future generations will __**thank**__ me for what I do today.' _

The Batarian shook the Director's hand.

* * *

><p>FTL

HUNTER stealth frigate, Black Zero

March 1**st****, 2168**

The Black Zero had entered FTL again, this time heading into the opposite direction it came, heading towards the Terminus Systems. It was routine and standard protocol. No ship could ever return to NOVA-6 the same route and had to randomized jump points before taking

a direct route.

"That's all you have to report?" General Oraka inquired, his holographic image projected in the debriefing room. Saren had stood before him, missing arm and all. Surprisingly enough, Septimus had glanced at Saren's missing arm and didn't bother commenting on it, as if he weren't surprised.

"Yes, sir," Saren nodded in affirmation. "Our stealth performed admirably. We were able to escape the planet without much trouble at all. However...those humansâ€¦I underestimated them, due to my arrogance, a mistake I will not make again. Kryses is dead and we have little to show for it. . We failed to kill one of their own super soldiers."

"So you did," General Oraka stoically observed. "Very well, I will inform Councilor Sparatus at once. Come home. You've earned rest and you need to be repaired." He pressed an icon on his end, and unceremoniously ended the debriefing. Saren had thought back to his battle with the Human. He was strong. Strong enough to defeat even him and force Renegade to retreat. That was a feat in itself. The humans had once had the curiosity of the Turians.

Now they had their full and undivided attention.

* * *

><p>That's a wrap! Now you should be somewhat understanding the direction this story is going. There's still a few surprises left, which you'll have to keep reading if you want to find out!<p>

Plus, if you genuinely thought Blue Team or Renegade was going to walk out unscathed after the last chapter I really have a bridge to sell you. If you're going to act like a whiny petulant child and throw a tantrum because you're salty about the outcome, I'd suggest you look elsewhere. It's not going to change.

By the way, there are still OC submission categories still open!

1)A Partner for Alyxandria Shepard as she goes through the N7 Academy. Character can be male, female, drell, human, biotic, etc. Get creative! Give me a backstory of why they want to be N7, what type of combat they would specialize in, weapons, etc. They MUST be the same age as Shepard (15 or 16 years old, as I explained last chapter, I will explain N7 and teenage recruits in the future). If the character is male DO NOT write the character with the intention of pairing the two off. I will personally decide who goes with Alyx.

2)A xenophobic Asari Admiral, who has distaste for non-Citadel Races. However, she is the Asari equivalent of Cole. Explain her xenophobia and feats of Tactical Brilliance

3)URSC fighter pilot working on a top secret starfighter. If you want to submit details of the fighter you CAN but it's not necessary. You CAN assume said pilot participated in the battle of Zestiria OR the invasion of Khar'Shan.

4)Subordinates of Jack Harper. His right and Left hand men. I will choose two.

That's all!

Take care!

13. Solace

Mass Effect: The New Journey****

****Chapter Thirteen**:** Solace

All right, here we go! I've been waiting for this chapter ever since I introduced the Zestirians way back in Chapter Five! You guys finally get some answers to some long awaited questions that I've refused to answer until now. This will set off chains of events that will affect the rest of the story, from now until the dramatic climax!

That's right, what you just read was merely the introduction. I don't mean to sound pious or anything, but I felt like the genre needed a wakeup call, so I'll do it myself!

Which means, yes, while there will be plenty of plot, this story is now going to be more character driven, with Alyx, front and center. There's a method to my madness, ya'll!

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* * *

><p>Citadel Presidium

****March 2****nd****, 2168 URSC standard ****

****11:00 hours Citadel Standard Time ****

Eighteen-year old Mordin Solus adjusted his business attire; the Salarian was, understandably, uncomfortable. As a young, bright, and admittedly, inexperienced agent of the Special Task Group, he disliked formal meetings, most of all with politicians whom he regarded with contempt at best and outright disgust and loathing at worst. However, he was tasked to inform the Council on the STG's latest update on the Batarians and his father, even into his "old" age, was hard at work in black site locations doing things he'd rather be doing. So, his son was sent instead. As brilliant and full of vast potential that Mordin saw himself with, even he felt a bit uneasy. He was a rookie agent, having to report to the most powerful beings in the Galaxyâ€|personally.

"The Council will see you now," an asari, likely the same asari that told his father long ago, spoke to him politely.

Mordin nodded in thanks, and carried a brief case with him, getting an odd sense of dÃ©jÃ vu. The young Salarian ignored it, in favor of getting focused.

As the elevator rose up slowly, Mordin could see the Citadel Fleet patrolling the outer rings out in the Widow System. Over the past eight years, the number of dreadnoughts owned by the Citadel races, had expanded exponentially. The Turians, unrestricted from the Treaty that had limited their naval power, now an impressive one hundred and fifty capital ships, and growing! The citizens noticed this, of course, they weren't stupid, but considering the booming economy, the hundreds of trillions of credits that flew into the defense industry and those related to it, only a very small minority even remotely cared, even the Terminus Systems as the increased spending by the Citadel only filled their pockets even faster. There wasn't a single Citadel race that didn't have at least double-digit number of capital ships, nowadays.

The Asari however, were a bit different, so to speak. While they had increased the number of dreadnoughts, like all of them, they were more concerned with firepower and quality, rather than the Turians who wanted to create as many as they could before the Council reinstated the Treaty again. The STG knew for a fact that the Asari were building a "super" dreadnought, larger than the Destiny Ascension, but details were extremely sketchy, except for the name: Impending Justice. Whoever the contractor was, or even what system the damn thing was being constructed at, the monogendered race kept behind more classified firewalls and media blackouts than the STG could be bothered with. No matter, so long as the Asari kept out the STG's way for its projects, their so-called new flagship was of little concern.

If someone a year ago, were to ask Solus if the repeal was necessary, he would've shouted "no" to his heart's content, believing it all to be a waste. When Khar'shan went dark, that all changed. The Council, or more specifically, the Turians, had anticipated it, and yet the invasion force shocked the STG to its core. NONE of them had ever seen an invasion fleet that large. Their probes had counted more than 15,000. Khar'shan didn't stand a chance and the entire planet, along with the Hegemony and its colonies had fallen. Mordin didn't quite know if they were outnumbered, yet, but based on his data, they were outgunned by such a ludicrous degree that it was almost comical if the situation weren't so serious.

"Ah, well. New Data suggest new forward thinking. Much to plan, indeed," Mordin spoke, unusually cheery. "New species definitely fascinating. Very, very interesting times ahead!"

When Mordin had finally reached the Council chambers, he heard shouting. Odd. The Council never lost their tempers. He crossed the threshold after a biometric scan and walked right into a "well" a goddamn shit storm.

"Are you kidding me, Sparatus?! General Oraka!" Tevos near shouted at the top of her lungs, her face full of rage and disbelief. This was a woman who, seemingly, rarely got irate. Whatever the Turian Councilor and General Oraka had done to set her off must've been damning.

Sparatus had narrowed his eyes. "We've told you now out of sheer courtesy! It wasn't something the Hierarchy desired to keep secret for too long. Please Councilor, calm yourself!"

"I will not! Not after what you...you've done! How COULD you? Never mind the fact that you sent a team of covert black ops team to Khar'shan, a rogue state I might add! Never mind the fact that this black ops team is a secret Turian project designed to create _super soldiers_. Also, never mind the fact that they killed _humans_, which, considering the implications, WHEN they come here, should they ask for it, they will have political leverage _at best_ and at worst, an excuse to go to war. NOW, to top it all off, you kidnapped CHILDREN to turn them into killing machines just to satisfy your own egos and to prove that you _could_? You bloody barbarians!" Tevos spat, her disgust was clear as a summer day.

"We had noâ€"

"Spare me the _bullshit_," Tevos interjected, causing Valern, Sparatus, Septimus and Mordin (whose presence was either ignored or wasn't perceived) to blink in shock. Tevos had _always_ had an air of civility and professionalism, with centuries of experience dealing with politicians and using backhanded compliments to snake her way into getting what she wanted. They had never seen her _this_ direct and to-the-point. "You had no choice? Is _that_ what you were going to say, Councilor?" she openly mocked.

"We gained valuable intelligence because of _**MY**_ HUNTERS," General Oraka shot back, fighting fire-with-fire.

"Intelligence the Special Task Group could'veâ€" Valern started to say but the Turian had sneered and surprisingly enough, Tevos mirrored his action. The General was about to reply to the Salarian, but Tevos had interjected.

"Oh, _you_ are not off the hook either, Councilor," Tevos glared accusatorily at the Salarian. Valern blinked, in response.

"Me? What does the actions of the _Turians_ have to do with me?" he spoke calmly, but the undercurrent of rage and disbelief was obvious to anyone with remote knowledge of reading body language of various species.

"You don't see it?" Tevos scoffed incredulously. "The Special Task Group is _theoretically_ considered be THE most effective intelligence, counterintelligence, and espionage organization in the _galaxy_." She simply stated a fact. "And somehow, somehow, you Goddess forsaken morons missed nearly _three-thousand_ Turian youth being missing?! That leaves one of two options: Option One, is that you were complicit in the kidnappings and actively assisted General Oraka in his little pet project born out of a bruised egoâ€"General Oraka clenched his fists in fury at the thinly veiled insultâ€"Or option two is that the STG has become so incompetent over the centuries that they were unaware of said program despite your organization's reputation for knowing all, seeing all," she mocked. "Now, Councilorâ€|which is it? Neither option looks well for you." Tevos had abandoned _all_ decorum and simply said what was on her mind outright.

"â€|Weâ€|simply did _not_ know," Valern admitted, shamefully. Privately, he was impressed with the measures the Hierarchy had taken to stay a step ahead of the STG and keep the HUNTER program top secret. "Even still, I'd like to think my organization would've been far more suited to this task than your HUNTERS."

"No, they wouldn't have been. You know, why? Because they'd be dead! These human super soldiers are exceptionally powerful. Only my HUNTERS stand any sort of chance at defeating them."

"Be that as it may, you still committed a heinous act! Your own youth for goddess' sake Councilor," Tevos shook her head, this time her voice was of soft disappointment rather than ire. Sparatus frowned hating when she pulled that card; because he had known her long enough to know this was genuine. "Were these humans not so powerful, I'd earnestly consider having the Turians' rights as Council members to beâ€|questioned."

And the **minute** I even thought for a moment that you were serious about it, I would order Saren to rip you apart and have your corpse be delivered to the Justicar Order as a message to the rest of your species,' General Oraka thought darkly, but he held his tongue. He wasn't a racist, par se, but the sanctimonious tendencies of the asari as a whole really irritated him to no end. He'd burn Thessia to the ground before he would allow the asari to actively humiliate his species by kicking them out of the Council and losing valuable galactic influence.

"Councilorsâ€|Generalâ€|please," Mordin spoke slowly, for once, not sure he was even supposed to hear half of the revelations he did.

"Agent Solus," Valern stoically acknowledged. "I'm sure you'll beâ€|discreet on what you just heard?"

Well, that answered his question.

"Affirmative Councilor. I heard nothing. I saw nothing. No real interest in Turian Super Soldiers. Interesting, individually, yes. But on whole, not concern," he replied with a motor mouth. The other individuals in the room stopped themselves from rolling their eyes.

"Your report, Agent Solus?" Tevos inquired, eager to get the hell out of this room and back to her suite for a drink. Goddess knew she needed one.

"Affirmative, Councilor," Mordin replied nodding, taking out his brief case with several files. He clicked an icon on the briefcase and several holographic images appeared. All three of the Council members, excluding General Oraka, who wasn't the least bit surprised, had their eyes widened.

Mordin had to smirk a bit, enjoying himself at the moment. Even as eccentric and a relatively kind person he was, it wasn't every day that you could be smug in front of the most powerful beings in the galaxy.

"Councilors, I believe its time we've repaired our strained relationships across the galaxyâ€|permanently."

* * *

><p>URSC Midnight Sun

****March 2****nd****, 2168 ****

****1300 Hours, USG Standard Time ****

Director Xavier, dressed informally with only a sand tee shirt and MultiCam pattern ACUs and boots, was busy in the Captain's Cabin going over last minute details of the formal surrender of the Batarian Hegemony, the seizure of ALL of their assets, resources, and intelligence and most importantly, the relocation of Batarian colonists to Khar'shan. There would be dozens, if not hundreds, of corporations who would be eager to jump at the chance to rebuild Khar'shan as he intended to do so, and with 20 percent of all USG jobs being related to infrastructure (for good reason), there would be no shortage of dedicated labor.

Wiping some sweat off his brow, the dark-skinned leader of humanity stood up from his desk and stretched his muscles. Sighing, he decided to take a five-minute break and refilled his mug with hazelnut-flavored coffee. He had to smile a bit as he looked out his viewport at Khar'xhan. He'd be lying to himself, if he didn't think the planet itself wasn't gorgeous. Even after the URSC had crushed all opposition and wrecked the Batarians in a one-sided war not seen since the Gulf War, when humanity was still fractured into nations, the planet never lost its luster or allure. A shame the dominant species on it wasâ€|or were, vile and corrupt. That would change in the upcoming decades, he'd make sure of it.

Taking another sip of his coffee, he groaned slightly when he heard the door of his quarters open unceremoniously. "Lieutenant Singh," he breathed out in annoyance, assuming it was one of the officers aboard the Midnight Sun assign to be his temporary secretary. "I said I didn't wish to be disturbed."

"Oh, really, Miles? You can't spare a moment for me?" came a teasing voice he knew all too well. His eyebrows shot up in surprise and he turned around to see the Commander-in-Chief of the Office of Strategic Intelligence herself: Admiral Ishigami.

"Sayuri?" Xavier blinked, still unsure if he was seeing things. He wasn't, the 5'11" Admiral was dressed in black-and-grey urban camouflage ACUs, her four star rank on either shoulder. Even in uniform, Ishigami's voluptuous athletic figure could be clearly seen.

"In the flesh," she smirked, crossing the threshold and the door closing behind her. She took off her uniform's top, and only her plain black short-sleeved tee shirt underneath remained. She folded it neatly in half and laid the top on the armrest of the largest couch in Xavier's office. Her hair, tied up in a bun, was let loose, falling to her shoulders. "Much better," she muttered to herself, feeling much more freedom of movement. "Surprise to see me?" she asked coyly.

"Hell yeah," he admitted with a chuckle, setting his coffee on his desk and making his way towards the front to lean against it crossing his arms. "How'd you get in? Especially without the people on this ship notifying me?"

"Miles," she looked at him expectantly, "I'm the leader of OSI, a level 10 security clearance and a full Admiral who's feared by nearly

2 billion soldiers. You really think I don't have a few tricks up my sleeve if I want to surprise you?"

Xavier chuckled. "I suppose you're right," he admitted, smiling slightly at the Japanese woman. "Why'd you come all the way out here? Technically, OSI doesn't really have much to do. You could've been on shore leave for all I'd have cared."

Ishigami shrugged. "You know how I am, I can't stay in one place for long. When I heard the news of the Batarian's surrender I had to come check out the results myself. Conquering an entire planet and its small interstellar empire? Heh, history may give you a title like Alexander," she teased.

Rolling his eyes playfully, he responded, "Okay, fuck out of here with that. I'm not that great," he replied modestly, with the Intelligence Flag officer raising an appreciative brow of his humility before he continued, "They'll call me Xavier the Exultant!" he called out childishly, pointing his hand in the air, dramatically looking off into the distance.

"Ugh, you're such a child!" Ishigami snorted, but couldn't help but laugh. If anyone ever saw this side of the Director, he probably would leave his entire Cabinet, advisors and Parliament dumbfounded in disbelief.

Giving her a cheeky grin and sticking his tongue out, "You know you love it," he joked. Ishigami didn't reply. She only gave a half shrug, not committing either way.

"Maybe I do, maybe I don't," she ambiguously teased. Of course, she had already admitted it to Izanagi that she loved everything about the man in front of her, but she wasn't through joshing him just yet.

"Besides," she crossed the distance between them and wrapped her arms around his waist and gave him a short three-second kiss on the lips, which he returned wholeheartedly. "I fucking missed you," she admitted, biting her lip.

Xavier held the admiral close and tapped an icon on his desk to prevent any eavesdroppers or accidental walk-ins. He put his chin on top of her dark hair. "That makes two of us," he told her sincerely. "I lost track of how many times I wished you were here to calm my nerves down and get rid of my stress. You have no idea how much hell I've dealt with in the past week."

Sayuri bit her lip, swallowing her guilty conscience. She was, indirectly, the reason for all of that stress in the first place. Ishigami banished those thoughts and pulled him by both his hands. "Tell me about it."

"What?"

"I want you to tell me," she repeated, leading him to the couch. She sat down on the couch and Xavier, instinctively, laid down long ways with his head in her lap. Both Director and Admiral interlocked a hand, while Ishigami used her other hand to scratch his short Caesar cut to the Director's delight. This was the most intimate the two had ever been, yet it happened as naturally as the sun rising in the

east, signaling the two no longer felt that they were in a casual relationship. "Go on, Miles," she urged him.

"It'sâ€¦" he hesitated for a few moments, unsure of how to proceed. He rolled his head upwards in Sayuri's lap and locked eyes with her. Brown eyes stared back at him, ready to understand as much as she could, and finally, for good measure, gave the subtlest of squeezes to the hand that had interlocked with the Director. That's when the last wall shattered and he smiled ever so slightly.

"This stress is fucking killing me," he told her bluntly. "I don't know how I'm not fucking falling apart at the moment. So much political bullshit to deal with, day in and day out. Keeping Admiral Lasky and the Spartans' origins secret. Then there's the Zestirians and integrating them with URSC. We kind of fast-tracked them into the USG, hell we prepared for the possibility, but not in a situation like this. Godâ€¦and Kastellaâ€¦who the hell knows when we'll be able to rebuild the city. Best-case scenario is about a decade or so after we get rid of the radiation. Then there's the Batarriansâ€¦instead of just leaving them here, I made a conscious decision to rebuild them instead. Despite what they've done! I know it's probably going to cost me my approval rating, but I couldn't be a hypocrite and then justâ€¦justâ€¦" he trailed off, closing his eyes.

"It's okay, Miles," Ishigami whispered, kissing his forehead. "For the record, I'm really proud of you."

"Proud of me? What on earth for?"

"Becauseâ€¦you proved yourself to be the better man," she told him, honestly. "Miles, you're one of a kind. You've been handed practically dictatorial powers by _legitimate_ means, yet you're still the same kind man who didn't let it go to your head. That takes phenomenal willpower, something a good many of our species lack." _'Including myself,' _she added, privately.

"No, I'm notâ€¦" he told her bitterly. "I'm not as perfect as you think I am."

She raised a brow. "I never implied that you were. Besides, there are only three things in the galaxy that are perfect: cookies-and-cream flavor ice cream, skittles, and pepperoni pizza. Now unless you somehow magically turn into those foods, you're not ever coming close to perfection," she joked, kissing him on the lips again.

"You and your love of junk food," he smirked, looking up at her. "Officers have to be role models you know?"

"I blame you! You started it when we had our first movie night together, remember?" she grinned.

Xavier smiled, before faltering a bit. "Butâ€¦reallyâ€¦I almost gave in. Oh, God, Sayuri. When Kastella was destroyed, when I saw millions of people die before my eyesâ€¦something justâ€¦snapped. I wanted revenge. I wanted them dead." He bit his lip. "Sayuriâ€¦I almost did it. I really did."

Ishigami burrowed her brows in confusion. "Milesâ€¦what are you talking about?" For once, she genuinely had no idea, despite knowing him very well.

"For a good two months after the invasion of Zestiriaâ€¦I fully planned on using the D-Heads." That was URSC jargon and shorthand for the Daxite WMDs.

Ishigami blinked in sheer surprise. "You meanâ€¦"

"Yeahâ€¦" he admitted solemnly. "Once we humiliated them on the groundâ€¦I was going to start cracking planets and colonies. ALL of them."

"Jesusâ€¦" Ishigami frowned. "â€¦Why?" she asked him sternly, as if practically demanding for an explanation. Noticing his visibly hurt expression, she softened her features instantly and squeezed his hand. "I'm sorryâ€¦" she apologized, genuinely. "Just tell me. I won't judge you." _God knows I'm probably the last person in the world who has the right. _

"Because I was being angry and selfish. I only kept thinking about all that _**I**_ had personally built, what _**I**_ had lost, what _my_ legacy being destroyed means for me," he told her. "I wanted them to pay and I wanted to send an entire message to the galaxy that we were not a power to be fucked with and I was going to wipe out the Batarians to prove it. God, I was such an idiot," he chastised himself for his childish irrational behavior.

"I see," Ishigami nodded with as much understanding as she could. "What changed your mind? You went from sanctioning genocideâ€¦" Xavier had cringed at the bluntness. Giving him a pensive gaze, "Look Miles I'm here for you, always and forever, but I'm sure as _hell_ not going to sugarcoat anything you do. Calling it how I see it. I expect _you_ to do the same to me."

He huffed. "I guess you're right," he admitted.

"Of course I am. Because I knowâ€¦" she kissed him again. "I can get away with it," she smirked playfully. "Anyhowâ€¦as I was saying. You went from interplanetary terricide to offering to rebuild them and left the table of the option to join the URSC in a few decades. I'd love to hear the leap in logic."

"Let's just say a couple guys talked me out of it," Xavier replied, dodging the question.

"Really? Who? Lasky?"

"No. I tell him a lot of things, but not this."

"The Arbiter?" Ishigami guessed again.

"No. Xuen and Xade."

Sayuri did a double take, not expecting that AT ALL. "Waitâ€¦what?! The Kings?!"

Xavier gave her a nod in confirmation. "Sayuri, that conversation is probably one of the most detailed memories of my lifeâ€¦"

Months agoâ€¦

"_Have you gone mad, Xavier?!" Xade, the Calean King , roared in anger as the lizard alien slammed his fist on the marble table, his strength easily cracking it . "Please tell me now!" _

"_Oh, on the contrary your majesty, I'm quite sane," Xavier said coldly. "Why would you want to spare these low-life scum?! They attacked you! Destroyed your home! I will see to it that they payâ€¦permanently." _

_Xuen, shook his head, clearly disappointed in Xavier. The Draxian King still believed Xavier had a lot to learn about being a leader, in his eyes. "By destroying their homeworld? Think rationally, my young human friend," he told him calmly. "What satisfactions will this type of bloodshed give you? None. I know from personal experience. What you're doing is simply immoral from every perspective. There isn't a rational argument you can make to justify it." _

"_What about the people in Kastella who've beenâ€¦" _

_Xuen actively glared at the Director. "Stop. Don't you _**dare**_ insinuate that I don't feel sorrow for the loss of my people. Do not presume me to be the disgraceful child that _you_ are acting like as of this moment. You are taking this more personal than we are."

_

"_Then what will you have me do, your Majesties? Simply let them get away it?! I can't! I won't! Not while nearly two billion dead because of the Batarians!" _

_Xade snorted. "Tell me, Directorâ€¦I wonderâ€¦is the reason you're taking this so hard is because your legacy was our agreement to be brought into the URSC?" he asked him, pointedly. To say the inquiry was a loaded one was the understatement of the galaxy. _

_Xavier's jaw dropped in defiance ready to deny the accusation, but Xuen joined in. "Don't presume us to be fools, Xavier. We know you are a sincere and compassionate man, we wouldn't have dealt with you for so long if we believed you anything less than the honorable man you presented yourself." Xuen narrowed his eyes. "Butâ€¦we know you are flawed as the rest of sapient kind. You feel sorrow for my people, that much I can tell, but on a deeper level I see in your eyes a lost soulâ€¦who's dangerously diverting from the path of honor he once walked. Your anger is a temporary emotion which can lead to permanent consequences." _

_Director Xavier swallowed hard, flummoxed at the Kings' wisdom and intuition. He couldn't come up with a reasonable retort. Had he really been selfish and irrational this entire time?

_

"_Directorâ€¦I know how you feel. But this is NOT the way," the Calean King told him softly. "This is wicked. This is _wrong_. We can rebuild Kastella. It may take decades, but we can and we WILL rebuild. You destroy a planetâ€¦they will NEVER get it back. It's a decision you will live with for the remainder of your days and humanity will _forever_ be a plight on the galaxy as billions of souls cry out in anguish. I cannot in good conscience let you do this. Please, Director, reconsider. Please don't do this! If I have to get on my knees and __**beg**__ you, then I will!" Judging from

the look the lizard alien was giving him; Director Xavier knew he was dead serious. _

"_Iâ€| the black human swallowed, uncomfortably. "I see. Iâ€|will give you my answer tomorrow but I'll give it thought," he managed to stutter out, their words eating at his insecurities. God, he wished Sayuri was here. _

"_Thank you, Director," Xade breathed out in relief. Both he and his fellow King dismissed themselves from the private room, but not before Xavier called out to Xuen. The Draxian King turned to him, while the Caelean left, leaving the two leaders alone._

"_Your Majestyâ€|say I do take your adviceâ€|what now? Iâ€|don't know what I'm going to do. I'm not even sure what I CAN do," he admitted._

Xuen told him, "Eight years ago you showed up at our doorstep as friends and potential allies and instead of forcing our compliance when we did not want to join the then-Alliance like others in your position could and likely would have, you wholly allowed our independence and thus earned our respect for generations for humankind. What do you do now you ask? Same thing you did years ago, show you are not the monsters like those who belong to the Hegemony. You're the better man. The Director I knew back then didn't let rage compromise who he was." He turned back towards the door.

"_And just what am I, your Majesty?" _

_Xuen gave a small smile, but didn't turn around. "There is a an old folklore tale in my people's beliefs, that once in a sapient being's life they are tested, unknowingly, by the gods to figure out their purpose and the choice he or she makes affects them for an eternity, even into the great lifestream once this mortal life has ceased. I believe this is your test, Miles. Will you become a monster like those you claim to hateâ€|or are you the better man? You will determine humanity's fate and standing, henceforth. I cannot make it for you; I can only offer my own voice of reason. Choose wisely, my young friend." Leaving him to contemplate that answer, Xuen left the leader of humanity to his own thoughts. _

Present Dayâ€|

"â€|.Iâ€|wow," Ishigami huffed out, speechless. She didn't know just how to react to that. "How many people have you told this?"

"No one. Not even Matias. I felt too ashamed of my own failure."

Ishigami smiled, genuinely touched. "Thank you, for trusting me."

"Mhmm," Xavier replied kissing her and positioning himself to be on top of her. She wrapped her arms around his neck, returning the favor with eager, savoring the taste of his lips. "Don't know what the hell I'd do without you."

"Hopelessly lost?" she teased.

"Something like that."

"You knowâ€¦we still got an hour and a half before the High Chancellor's formal surrender," she grinned.

"God knows I've fucking wanted you for almost two weeks now."

"Then shut the hell up and fuck me already," she told him bluntly. The director smirked and kissed her again. He didn't know what it was, but he didn't know what the hell he'd do without this woman.

He prayed he'd never have to find out.

Timeline

March 2nd, 2168: High Chancellor Grothan formally surrenders at a ceremony at the capital city of the Hegemony. The outlines of surrender are generally as follows: the Batarian Hegemony formally disbands, all military assets seized or destroyed, all resources and colonies formerly belonging to the Hegemony are officially seized by the USG government to finance URSC expansion, reconstruction of Zestiria and Khar'shan. Also, Xavier signs an executive order hereby ordering all Batarian citizens and their families to be moved to Khar'shan. Travel is restricted and interstellar communication is tightly controlled, rarely allowed. Khar'shan goes dark to Citadel space. _

March 5th, 2168: With the war over, Xavier relinquishes his emergency powers and the SUMMER Contingency is lifted. However, funds from the SUMMER contingency will still be in use until the fiscal years ends on June 30th. July 1st, URSC spending will normalize._

March 15th, 2168: The USG Parliament passes a resolution creating a new temporary branch of the URSC: the Occupation Defense Force. The resolution requires a minimum of 15 million ODF personnel on Khar'shan at a time, with upwards of up to 70 million in times of great emergency. The ODF will draw mainly from a percentage of civilian police veterans, Military Police, Security Forces, and other law enforcement agencies personnel who wish to be reassigned. No civilian Private Military Corporation is allowed to operate on Khar'shan without the direct oversight and jurisdiction of the ODF and URSC. _

March 31st, 2168: Vice-Admiral Steven Hackett is promoted to Admiral and appointed Military Governor of Khar'shan. _

April 2nd, 2168: The URSC makes contact with a Citadel delegation sent to Khar'shan. Both parties, while weary of each other, agree to meet in June, at the Citadel for formal establishment of relations._

April 8th, 2168: Colonel Tyson Lamont Greystone and Sergeant Major Tarius Krios retire from the Titan Drop Shock Troopers after being recovering from their engagement with Renegade squadron. Both decide to live on Eden Prime. _

April 9th, 2168: The funerals of Kai Leng and Thane Krios are held, both N7 given medals of valor posthumously. _

April 11th, 2168: Alyxandria Shepard turns fourteen years old.

She happily celebrates her birthday with her father and mother on Eden Prime. _

_April 28__th__, 2168: Final stats come in for the Battle of Khar'shan: 612 OMEGA super soldiers, gave their lives in the invasion, along with approximately 5,798,803 total fatalities on the ground with the URSC Army taking the most casualties. It is estimated that roughly 150,000,000 Batarian soldiers/militia men/reservists lost their lives in the weeklong conflict. Civilian casualties, are, despite the URSC's efforts of restraint, mirror the military. Any OMEGA casualties are to be listed as MIA in public records, circumstances of their deaths classified at level 8 by executive order of the Minister of Defense, with the consent of Director Xavier. _

_April 30__th__, 2168: After reviewing reports and statistics on the battle of Khar'shan, Admiral Ishigami authorizes the creation of the "SIGMA-initiative" classified level 10. The Office of Strategic Intelligence is secretly screening hundreds of human, drell, and Draxian teenagers on Earth, Eden Prime, Zestiria, Axiom Prime, New Sanghelios, and all other major colonies of the Unified Species Government. Director Xavier quietly authorizes the breach in privacy.

—

_May 1__st__, 2168: The URSC Daedalus is nearing completion and a Captain is chosen: Dorian Sejanus. Captain Sejanus participated in both the battle of Zestiria and invasion of Khar'shan. The Captain's security clearance goes from 7 to 9. _

_May 13__th__, 2168: The Kings of Zestiria agree to open the contents of LNOS, but only to select personnel and the agreement that the contents inside remain classified at level 10 indefinitely. _

* * *

><p>New Sanghelios

**Katrana City, Capital city of Sangheili Empire **

May 15**th****, 2168 **

New Sanghelios was a marvel in every sense of the word. Settled by the Sangheili over a century prior in the year 2063, the planet had grown over the course of a hundred years to boast a population of over three billion, counting human and drell immigrants. Hundreds of Covenant designed ships protected the strategically important planet along with 30 Orbital Defense Platforms, manned by URSC personnel and 20 Strategic Defense Platforms, under the direct control of the URSC Navy. Seeing as how it was, literally, only one light year from Earth, it was even closer to Humanity's homeworld, than even Reach was. However, Sangheili still controlled the planet, independently of the USG. It was a complex relationship, but the Empire, for the most part, honored the wishes and obeyed the laws created by Parliament with few exceptions. There was little worry. The Sangheili had proven their loyalty, quite literally, hundreds of times over, and had the absolute trust of humanity and let them deal with their own internal affairs.

Like now.

"Are we to let these dishonorable Turians who spilled the blood of our brothers simply walk the galaxy without consequence!?" a Sangheili Councilor had roared in rage. Xavier had declassified the documents containing information on the HUNTERS on the condition the High Council would keep it amongst themselves.

"And what would you have us do? Start a conflict independent of our human brethren? Is that what you wish?"

"Yes," the Councilor replied resolutely. "I would lead the fleet myself if need be."

"Then you are a fool," another Sangheili chimed in. "You've read their codices have you not? We have superior firepower, but they still outnumber us by the trillions. You are among our kind's youth, Councilor, with much potential, so I can forgive your impudence but you are brash, hot-headed and overeager to prove yourself."

The young Sangheili stood, nearly reaching for his blade, impulsively. "I will not stand to be insulted!"

"You will sit down and hold your tongue," came the commanding voice of Thel 'Vadam, who made his presence known, along with Imperial Admiral Rtas 'Vadam. Thel had forgone the armor he worn when he and the Master Chief fought side-by-side for golden armor, making him look more regal, if anything. Rtas, wore the gold and silver armor of an Imperial Admiral, along with a crown above his head.

"M-m-my Arbiter!" the councilor stammered out, bowing his head along with the other Councilors. "I meant no disrespect!"

Thel held up a claw, his disgust clear. "Listen well, boy. I allowed you on this Council because I believed that my advisors should have faces, both young and old for a variety of perspectives. Do you wish to squander that honor by being an impulsive hatchling?" he inquired with a glare. "So, by all means, raise your sword against a fellow Councilor in my presence. I assure you that it will be the last time you draw breath."

Needless to say, the young Sangheili, who was born in the 22nd century, long after the establishment of the Empire, backed down. "My apologies, Arbiter."

He felt Thel's claw on his shoulder. "See to it that you work on your ire, Kas'r. There is a time and place for such emotions. Let it be known that I do value your counsel and youthful insight."

Kas'r nodded his head in respect. "Your praise honors me, Arbiter."

Thel turned to the rest of the Council and took his seat at the head of the table, floating on a gravity chair, like the Prophets centuries earlier. "I've already deliberated with Rtas and we both agree that a counterattack is unnecessary." Kas'r clenched his mandibles to stop himself from protesting.

"May the Council have the honor of knowing why?"

"You shall. Only these Turians have killed thirty of our brothers."

Regrettable, but they did perish like all Sangheili should strive to: on the battlefield. There can be no more honorable way for a warrior to leave this life." There were murmurs of agreement. Although relatively docile compared to their once life in the Covenant, there were still traditions that would never die among Sangheili, no matter how much time passed.

"In this I decree no Sangheili ship will retaliate against the Turian Hierarchy, under orders from myself. I will execute any of you myself should you not heed my command."

"By your word, Arbiter," they all replied simultaneously.

He waved his hand. "Then I consider this matter closed and this meeting adjourned. Array my orders to your fleets and commanders. Rtas and I will remain here for the time being. You are all dismissed."

The High Council members bowed their heads and quietly exited the chambers, leaving Thel and Rtas by their lonesome.

"Politics, how tiresome," Rtas snorted, in disgust. He was thankful that he didn't have to deal with day-to-day activities of the Empire, like his old friend did. He belonged either on the battlefield or in command of a ship, preferably the former, and his position as Imperial Admiral (a title once belong Xytan Jar Watinree) allowed him to do so wholeheartedly.

Thel had chuckled, amused. "I've grown used to it. You should consider a career," he lightly jested.

"Hardly," he sneered. "I would've used my blade to cut Kas'r's tongue from his mouth. A growing parasite he is."

"Possibly," the Arbiter agreed. "But he is young, and I see much potential in him. He has, as the humans say, much growing up to do."

"If you say so. I'll hold my judgmentâ€¦for now."

"That's all I ask," Thel nodded. "Believe me, I've dealt with far worse over the past century."

"Hnnâ€¦" Rtas drawled out, nodding. "My Arbiter," Rtas started formally, surprising Thel. "May I have your counsel?"

The Arbiter nodded seriously. "Walk with me." Turning on his heel and his cape swirling behind him, Rtas followed the Sangheili leader. The duo was silent in their journey, as tradition dictated. Several Sangheili minors passed them and beat their chests in solidarity with the two elites. Finally coming to a door, the Arbiter pressed his hand against the console. Recognizing his biometrics, there was a 'beep' and the door hissed open. Nodding back to Rtas, he crossed the threshold along with his old friend walking down a short hallway that would eventually lead to a private balcony with a breathtaking view of Katruna city. Despite being only classified as a "Chicago-class" city by the Unified Species Government, Katruna City was still very large and full of social, economic, and military activity. From the balcony, Rtas could see dozens of human children wrestling with Sangheili hatchlings on playgrounds and playing a human game called

"King of the Hill", drell doing business deals with Draxian immigrants, and Caleans and Sangheili equivalent of 'teenagers' having contests of strength and skills in various sports games. The USG

Rtas was in near awe, judging from his mandibles hanging low. "You've never told me about this. A majestic view," he had to admit.

"Indeed, it is," Thel agreed. "It is my place of solitude, where the strain of keeping the Empire goes away, at least for a moment. You see that?" he asked Rtas, pointing towards the playground where the mixed species children were playing. "That's a sight I will never tire of," he admitted.

"You built this here specifically on purpose didn't you?" Rtas smirked, knowingly.

"Indeed. It's something I couldn't have imagined centuries ago." He then waved off his sentimentality and turned to his old friend. "What troubles you, Rtas? What we discuss here shall not leave here, that I vow."

"You have my thanks," Rtas bowed his head. "May I have the honor of being honest with you?"

"Of course. I cannot give counsel when the tongue is treacherous."

Rtas chuckled, but grew serious. "My Arbiterâ€|this mission. Allying with the humans. I'm starting to have my doubts," he admitted. To his shock, Thel didn't seem fazed or surprised in the least. "I'm aware of what our reward will be if the URSC takes over this galaxyâ€|butâ€|I do not know if I even _want_ them."

"What has brought this on, Rtas?" Thel asked neutrally, his face unreadable.

"This USGâ€|it is an honor working with them. These humans here are the same, yet different than the UNSC. No treacherous elements of ONI that we have to look out for. I trust them completely, with my own life need be. As much as I respected Lord Hood, Xavier seems to embody all of the traits of humanity that we Sangheili admire. We have a new planet, a thriving population where we can hide our past sins and move past them. We can peacefully coexist with an organization that respects our desire for independence. Iâ€|" he trailed off, but the Arbiter knew exactly what he was going to say.

"You do not wish to return to our home galaxy do you?"

A pause.

"Iâ€|do not," Rtas admitted. "I've grown fond of this galaxy, Arbiter and our new home. That's not to say I don't miss Sanghelios, I do. However, seeing how we thrive here isolated from the threat of the parasite, the Servants of Abiding Truth, the wretched Jiralhanae, I see what potential our species has. In one century, the Sangheili have made more progress than we ever did under the thumb of the Prophets. It saddens me that billions of our brothers will not be

able to enjoy the fruits of our labors. We simply happen to be in the wrong place at the right time."

"I sympathize with your plight, Rtas," Thel told him, putting a hand on his shoulder.

"Do you agree?"

"I am not sure," Thel admitted. "But, you are not alone on this. From my talks with Admiral Lasky, there is similar sentiment amongst the UNSC and crew of Infinity. You have nothing to be ashamed of."

"You have my thanks," Rtas nodded his head, thankful that Thel didn't shut him down.

However, Rtas had unknowingly planted a seed of doubt in Thel's mind, subconsciously, as he watched the human and Sangheili children continue to play without a care in the world. They grew up in a world where there was no genocide hanging above their heads. Truly, they could be themselves.

Happy.

Independent.

Free.

Thel would ponder that internal debate for seemingly indefinitely as he watched mixed species mingle about in their daily lives, blissfully unaware of the moment.

* * *

><p>May 18****, 2168**

**Kronos System **

Top Secret Shipyard, 3 Parsecs from ARCHON

Hearing a beeping noise, URSC Captain Dorian Sejanus awakened from his slumber. Sejanus calmly pressed his hand on the snooze button and yawned. His storm grey eyes and brown hair was slicked back with his fingers.

"Captain, you are aware that you could've slept another fifteen minutes, no?" On the left of Sejanus, an A.I. appeared, who had taken the appearance of a 1980s Soviet General.

"I'm aware, Alexei," he replied calmly. "You know by now I prefer to get up 15 minutes before schedule."

Alexei nodded. "Very well, Captain. You should know we have 45 minutes before we arrive in Kronos."

"Thank you." Alexei saluted and tended to other matters on his ship. Technically, while the highest-ranking member of the transport-class frigate Now You See Me, he was only a guest, being summoned to a Top Secret location, classified level 10 by order of Ambassador Abu and Admiral Ishigami. As cold and calculating as Sejanus was, not even he dared to cross Admiral Ishigami. He wanted to make it to the

top, but he knew even had limits to what he could get away with, to his annoyance. She outranked him by several paygrades and if he so much as looked at her wrong, his career he meticulously built up would come crashing down the drain.

Stepping into the shower, he washed himself, efficiently and quickly, not wasting a single motion. He disliked long showers, as more time could be spent playing strategies, planning his next moves, and other miscellaneous actions. Stepping out, he shaved himself to look presentable, brushed his teeth, and put on his uniform when he was dry. The eagles on both of his shoulders were polished to perfection, just as he expected of himself in his eventual rise to power.

Stepping out in the hallways, he nodded seriously to a pair of passing ensigns, the junior offices getting out of his way quickly.

"We're a bit early, sir," Alexei told him through his earpiece. "You should head toward the hangar." Sejanus grunted, as he was heading towards the bridge, but made a sharp left, towards the elevator. The ship had shook a bit, signaling that it had docked with a small space station the size of an Orbital Defense Platform.

A drell was, conveniently, already waiting for him. He was dressed in an expensive black suit with matching sunglasses. Captain Sejanus was quietly impressed with the drell's sense of style and confidence he projected. For now, he'd made a decent first impression.

"Ambassador Abu," Sejanus greeted cordially, knowing full well this man was in charge for now at least.

Abu had waved him off. "Ugh, stop with that formality bullshit. I hate that. Call me Shi," he shook his head.

Dorian had raised an eyebrow, almost amused. "You hate formalities, yet you chose to be an ambassador?"

"It was either this or be stuck working some desk job at OSI. Trust me, Dorian; it's not a prospect that sounds fun. Believe me. When I'm at the negotiating table, I'm a _completely_ different person, so don't let my informality fool you," he warned.

"I wasn't aware we were on first name basis," Sejanus remarked dryly. Perhaps he should rethink his initial impression.

"Considering the circumstances I took to bring you here, I'll honestly call you whatever I damn please," Ambassador Abu lightly joked, but the Captain didn't laugh. The drell rolled his eyes. "Sheesh, they said you were stern, but this is ridiculous."

"I take my job very seriously Ambassador. I have ambitions and any time spent playing could hinder them," he spoke as-a-matter-of-factly.

Huffing, Abu had partly conceded to his point. "If you say so. Come, follow me."

The two were silent on their walk inside the station as various

engineers, construction workers, and even MP were taking a break, eating, laughing, drinking, playing pool. Clearly this was for R&R after a hard day's work. Dorian had narrowed his eyes recognizing their uniforms. The USG had standardized the work uniform for construction of the URSC Navy's ships, so it stuck out like a sore thumb. The ambassador had brought him to a shipyard? What on earth for?

"Aside from ARCHON, this is easily the most classified system in the URSC," Abu began to explain and, predictably, Captain Sejanus was already confused.

"ARCHON?"

"It's a harsh planet about 3 parsecs from Kronos, this system," he told him. "It's where our bleeding edge technology is tested. If you only knew about the fighter we builtâ€¦" he muttered.

The Captain's eyes had widened a bit. "Am I supposed toâ€¦"

"Yes, you're cleared to know. I'm the one who bumped your security clearance from 7, to 9. You're welcome," he drawled cynically.

"Iâ€¦thank you," he told him, formally, unsure of his sincerity. Privately, he wondered: if ARCHON was classified level 9, then what in the blazes of hell kind of information was classified at level 10?! No matter. He was still young, relatively. He'd replace Xavier and find out the URSC's dirty little secrets with patience and dedication.

Shi had waved him off. "I've read your file, Captain. It was close, but in the end, I chose you, because I know you'd do what's necessary. You're a cunning man of tactical brilliance and I believe you'll use her to your best ability. Likely in ways, I couldn't even dream of." The two had stepped into an elevator and rode it.

"Ambassador you still haven't told me what I'm here for. I was on Earth on shore leave until you called me away under orders from Admiral Ishigami."

Abu had smirked. "You are here because you are going to captain a vessel and escort me to the Citadel when we establish formal relations."

"And you need me for thatâ€¦whyâ€¦" Captain Sejanus had trailed off as the elevator doors became "clear" showing the void of space. For the first time in his career, Dorian Sejanus' jaw dropped to the floor. In the distant void, around 10,000 kilometers out, were two ships being constructed: one that was 6.3 kilometers long and the other approximately 21.5 kilometers.

"Holyâ€¦_shit_," he cursed, completely in awe, blinking several times just to make sure he wasn't being delusional. He had seen the URSC Infinity several times, the first being its commissioning ceremony ten years ago when he was a mere Lieutenant Commander. But the other shipâ€¦he didn't know ships that size were even _possible_, let alone feasible to build. The larger ship made the Infinity look puny by comparison.

"So, it seems you're not as stoic as you think you are," Abu smirked, crossing his arms. "Unfortunately for you, the bigger ship is reserved for a future four-star admiral or in some cases a Fleet Admiral him/herself. The smaller one, that's your ship. Captain Sejanus, I'd like to introduce you to the URSC Daedalus, the second Infinity-class starship in the URSC Navy."

"The _Daedalus_, huh? Wow," he blinked again, clearly not believing what he was seeing. There were hundreds of thousands of officers in the URSC and HE got the honor of commandeering the Infinity? Considering the fact that commander of Infinity was a flag officer this was _unprecedented_.

"I'm going to give you the short and sweet version so there's no bullshit. God knows I'm going to deal with that enough with the Citadel Council: you are going to Captain this ship. Various personnel whom we feel have potential will serve under you. From there, you will escort me to the Serpent Nebula, bringing this big badass ship with you. I will negotiate and establish relations with the Citadel races for one of genuine peace and friendship." While the URSC was genuinely going the peaceful route, they HAD to let the Council know that they meant business and was absolutely under no circumstances would they join the Citadel OR give up any of the planets formerly belonging to the Hegemony. The _Daedalus_ would dissuade them from the delusion of thinking they had _any_ sort of leverage whatsoever.

Dorian smirked. "Speak softly, carrying a big stick. Impressive."

"In this case, the "stick" being a starship that can fucking _wreck_ entire fleets by itself," the drell grinned.

"I'm honored, Ambassador. Truly." That time Captain Sejanus had no doubt of his sincerity.

The drell held out a hand. "Captainâ€|you ready to have the Council shit their pants?" he grinned.

"Didn't you want a peaceful negotiation?"

"Of course. This opportunity doesn't come enough. Might as well have some fun with it, right?"

Captain Sejanus had given him a smirk in return, actually amused. He shook his hand. "Of course."

It was now official: URSC Captain Dorian Sejanus would commandeer the URSC Daedalus and soon they'd be on their way to the Citadel.

The galaxy would forever change.

* * *

><p>Zestiria

**Farix Mountains, **

***LNOS" Facility **

Xuen and Xade stood inside the secret facility that had, for over ten years, been the talk of legend amongst his people. LNOS officially didn't exist and all knowledge was denied for very good reason. The mountains of Farix had been dug out using advanced construction materials in a 38 kilometer radius and it was protected by various materials that made scanning it from orbit all but impossible.

"Your Majestiesâ€|Director Xavier and his entourage will arrive soon. How shall we proceed?" Zora, a member of the Royal Guard who had fought alongside NOBLE team during the Batarian invasion, asked, then bowing his head.

"Bring them directly to this facility. Are Noble-Six, Admiral Lasky, the Arbiter, and Rtas with them?"

"Yes. We gave them strict instructions to bring them along as well."

"Very well, then. You're dismissed. Update me when they arrive."

"Of course, your Majesty," he saluted and left the two leaders alone.

"So, your Majestyâ€|how do you think they will take it?" Xade asked his fellow monarch.

Xuen, smirked. "I don't know. I predict lots of inquiries. I can't imagine anything less than total bewilderment, especially young Spartan-B312."

Of course Xuen was right as he stared at the project that the Zestirians had kept hidden from the Unified Species Government.

After allâ€|it wasn't every day that a ship thought was destroyed a hundred and thirty-two years ago was being reconstructed in a new galaxy.

(END)

Yes. You read that right. ALL will be explained next chapter! Well...not really as that'd spoil too much, but a good bit more! xD

:D

Next chapter: Lingering questions answered and the first contact with the Citadel along with negotiations, plus the start of Ishigami's pet project: SIGMA.

No codex, until next chapter!

14. The New Kids on the Block

Mass Effect: The New Journey

**Chapter Fourteen: **__The New Kids on the Block__

All right everyone! You finally get, long awaited answers to your questions in this chapter along with official establishment of relations with the Citadel. I'm so very sorry this took so long, as I had to have my computer repaired because I spilled water on it. Alas, everything is now A-OKAY!

There's going to be a lot of foreshadowing in this chapter and all subsequent ones, so pay extra close attention.

As an aside, I'm sort of disappointed that a lot of reviewers were way off in what their guesses for what the ship was. I thought about spelling it out completely, but decided to leave it ambiguous with plenty of hints. It's in the title of the last chapter for heaven's sake, lol.

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* * *

<p>Zestiria

****Farix Mountains,****

*****LNOS" Facility****

****May 21****st****, 2168 ****

Three Pegasus dropships made their way from the URSC Leader-class heavy carrier Barack H. Obama, after being escorted to the Vixa System, by a small battlegroup. Officially, the Obama was tasked to deploy over Zestiria to assist in reconstruction after the Batarian Invasion nearly eight months prior. The imposing carrier was instrumental in the liberation of Kastella with its thousands of Marines, Titan Drop Shock Troopers and Rapier fighters.

Unofficially, classified level 10, the carrier held nearly all of the URSC's most important figures, both military and civilian, practically unprecedented. Outside of Arcturus, Earth, Axiom Prime, or an Infinity-class carrier, it was outright illegal for all of these officials to be gathered in one place, an edict passed by the late Isaac Richards in 2060, when the then Systems Alliance wasn't even a decade old. However, the Kings assured him that this was necessary, as "LNOS" couldn't be leaked to the public at all costs. Xavier agreed, but, as a cautionary provision, in case the unthinkable happened, he ordered the Secretary of Defense to stay at Arcturus, to run the day-to-day operations of the USG. He would fill him in at a later date.

Inside the lead Pegasus were: Director Xavier, Admiral Ishigami, Admiral Lasky, Thel 'Vadam, Imperial Admiral Rtas Vadam, John-117, Nathan-B312, Jorge-052, General Hernandez, General Dragovich, and Fleet Admiral Ashdown. Two other Pegasus dropships were rotating with the lead one as decoysâ€|just in case.

They were five minutes out and were casually chatting amongst

themselves in their own corners.

"Soâ€¦Commander," Jorge huffed out as he sat across from the Master Chief. "These Turiansâ€¦you never got a chance to inform us personally," he said, crossing his arms. He and NOBLE-Six had been out of contact with the URSC for a good while, under Xavier's orders, classified level 9, thus missing a lot of the action on Khar'shan.

John looked at him and sighed and rolled his arm in a mild discomfort. He still wasn't quite back at his peak yet. "They're toughâ€¦the squadron we facedâ€¦they were exceptionally powerful. My team was nearly killed," he admitted.

"But you still won, right?" Nathan added, in a slightly cheery manner, a bit unusual for a Spartan.

"I will never consider ten of our brothers dead a victory," John replied coldly. Although, like the IIs, John was a bit uneasy around the IVs back on Requiem, he had truly grown to appreciate them as true Spartans over the decades. Hell, even the OMEGA, Fireteam ARCLIGHT in particular, he was starting to feel the close connection despite the fact that they were galaxies apartâ€¦literally! "Fred killed one, and yet they managed to kill ten of ours."

Jorge blinked. "Ten? Pftâ€¦blasted Turiansâ€¦." He shook his head in contempt. "How skillful, individually?"

Cortana decided to make her appearance known, her hologram appearing on John's forearm. "Do you want it sugarcoated or do you want me to tell you how it is?" the AI quipped, humorously. None of the Spartans cracked a smile, to her disappointment.

"I guess that answer's my question," she sighed. "Anyhow, Jorge, put it like thisâ€¦I saw what they could do. That squadron John and the rest of Blue Team faced? Outside of a SPARTAN-II, it's very likely all of the IIIs, IVs, and OMEGA would've ended up dead. Andâ€¦as sad as I am to say this, NOBLE-team would've been on that list too. However, the caveat to that is that they were likely very best of their super soldier program. And I find it highly unlikely that all of them are as strong based on a number of facts and circumstances. So in that sense, if we find ourselves facing their run-of-the-mil super soldiers, relatively speaking, you stand a good chance at victory. However, one thing is certain: Any Turian Super-Soldier encountered on the battlefield is a level 10 threat and must be neutralized **immediately** by ANY means necessary," Cortana reported gravely.

Both Nathan and Jorge nodded seriously, understanding. "I see. I'm sorry, Commander."

"Don't be," John replied, more evenly. "It just means we still have to get stronger," John vowed.

"Director, sir! LZ is sixty seconds out!" the lead pilot called out. Xavier, who was conversing with Ishigami, nodded, and told everyone to get ready.

"Johnâ€¦is it just meâ€¦or does Admiral Ishigami seemâ€¦different to you?" Cortana asked him privately. John did the subtlest of head

turns toward the feared Admiral. Cortana was right: her mannerisms, while still cold and calculating, yet John detected the faintest bit of warmth underneath, as if something had opened her up and let her guard down. To anyone else, she was still the same "Bitch of OSI", but to Spartans, who were known to read body language with ease, these changes were abundantly clear. Before, to John, Ishigami was nothing more than a Parangosky clone that was kept in line by the URSC's laws—for the most part anyhow. Now—he wasn't so sure how to react. Now, the Chief wouldn't go as far as to say he trusted the Admiral, far from it in fact, but as a threat or hostile? That had definitely waned over the past decade or so.

"Yes—I'm not sure how I feel about it personally," he admitted.

The lead Pegasus dropship flew toward the main peak of Farix and the REXes that guarded the facility took aim and stood down not even a second later, recognizing the IFF. A small rectangular shaped slit appeared on the side of the mountain and opened up, revealing a secret entrance. The pilot flew inside, and the doors closed and locked tight. Turning on a dime while hovering, the dropship sat down on a landing pad, and turned its engines off.

"Director—Admirals—Generals—welcome," Zora greeted with a genuine smile, and shook each of their hands. "Before we begin, I'd like to thank you again, Nathan. Were it not for you and Captain Carter, there is no way we could've reached the jammers in time. How is she, by the way?"

"I was just doing my job, Zora," Nathan assured, a bit uneasily. He didn't do what he did for fame or recognition. He did what he had to do, nothing more. "Last I heard of Captain Carter, she was recovering and being promoted to Major. As for her whereabouts now, I'm unsure."

"I see," the Draxian nodded. "I wish her well."

"I don't mean to be rude," Ishigami interjected. "But we had to pull a lot of strings to get all of us to this location simultaneously without raising suspicion."

"The Admiral is right," the Arbiter stated staring intently at the Draxian. "What is this project you wish to show us and more importantly why us in particular?"

Zora simply smiled. "That would spoil the surprise."

Lasky frowned, not really in the mood for games. But, alas, he'd be lying if he said he wasn't curious about what was inside this mountain that the Zestirians fought the URSC tooth-and-nail to protect its secrets. He pulled out a device and punched some icons.

/Cortana—any computer systems—?/

A reply came within milliseconds in the form of a text.

_/No, sir. This place is a ghost town. The moment I find a computer terminal I'll do some snooping./ _

Lasky put the device away.

"Well, then, lead the way," Xavier offered.

Zora nodded and lead the team to an elevator and punched in some complicated codes. "Your Majesties, this is Zora—we're on our way down. Can you have the ship ready when we arrive? Yes—Nathan is here along with Jorge. I...understood your Majesties. Zora out."

Zora turned to have three Spartans staring at him intently. "Was it something I said?" he joked.

"Why is it that you needed Jorge and I, specifically here?" Nathan asked with a slight edge to his voice.

Zora didn't miss a beat. "Before I answer that, since you're going to find out in a few minutes anyhow, let's get this out of the way: I know you are not from here—Nathan. Or should I call you SPARTAN-B312?" he asked rhetorically.

There was silence.

With that one sentence, the tension in the air became thick enough to cut with an energy sword. Every single occupant in the elevator, aside from the Sangheili, had their eyes widened to their greatest extent in sheer surprise. They knew? They KNEW?! How?!

Xavier's eyes hardened into a glare. "How do you know that? That secret is classified level 10 and it's passed down **verbally** from Director-to-Director over the past century with no written record of it ever. So how could you know that?"

"I'd advise you to answer the Director, Draxian," Rtas warned. "We will do what we must to keep our origins from being disclosed—if that includes glassing this planet—then we will," he threatened.

To their sheer surprise, Zora actually smirked. "And I'd expect nothing less from you, in all honesty. But I promise—all of your questions will be answered I promise."

"At least answer why the two of us are here?" Nathan asked again.

Zora smirked. "Why don't you see for yourself?"

The elevator doors opened to reveal, quite literally, the last thing any of them had expected.

The Long Night of Solace. _

The behemoth of a ship was being examined and reconstructed by dozens of engineers both Colean and Draxian who were running all kinds of tests to include structural integrity, studying the slipspace drive, plasma weapons, etc. Various Covenant infantry weapons were being studied and test fired by the engineers as well, no doubt recovered from the armories.

"â€|My Godâ€|" Xavier blinked in sheer surprise. It wasn't every day that the Director of the USG was surprised by anything. He was granted access to, literally, **every** single piece of classified information in the URSC, so he had intimate knowledge of all the various projects on ARCHON as well as the Daedalus and Olympus.

"By the Forerunnersâ€|" Thel had muttered, in total awe. Rtas, was staring intently at the ship, like a deer in headlights as if his very mind couldn't comprehend that a Covenant supercarrier was here, hidden all of this time.

Lasky shook his head. "LNOSâ€|the damn thing was right under our noses the entire time, in the codename."

"Johnâ€|I thought us being in an entirely new galaxy was crazyâ€|but a Covenant ship?" Cortana said to an equally surprised John. She laughed meekly. "This probably won't be the last time this happens, isn't it?"

"Likely not," John agreed. At this point, the only thing that would surprise the Master Chief now would be race of omnicidal machines hell bent on galactic conquest.

"How?!" Nathan coldly asked, clenching his fists. "Jorge and I destroyed this ship!"

"You did," came the grave voice of Xuen as he and Xade made their way with an entourage of the Royal Guard. The Draxian King dismissed his guard detail with a wave of his hand. "Truly exemplary soldiers you two are. As are all of you Spartans."

General Hernandez grunted, uncomfortable with the secret being discussed so openly. Judging from the rest of their entourage, they shared the Hispanic man's concerns.

"I'm not sure what this ship means to Comrade Jorge and Nathan," General Dragovich started, stepping forward. "But I'm sure you have explanation, yes?"

"It's quite simple, general." Xade pressed an icon on his wrist and a hologram of Reach and the Long Night of Solace appeared. John felt a wave of nostalgia swell up within him. "It's taken us years of research and investigation, going over tens of thousands of petabytes of data, navigational charts, surviving security footage, along with a plethora of other things but we're now confident in what happened over the planet you call "Reach".

"You all attempted to destroy the Long Night of Solace with a slipspace bomb," Xuen declared, stating the obvious. "What you didn't realizeâ€|was that while on board, the ship planned on leaving Reach moments before the bomb detonated."

Lasky had blinked several times. "Waitâ€|what?!" That contradicted both the official AND unofficial story in the history books about the Fall of Reach.

Xuen nodded gravely. "According to what we were able to recover and translate to our best knowledge, â€|" he checked a paper document to be sure. "â€|Forecaster in your Covenant ordered its Commander back

from Reach to a Sacred City of some sorts."

'_Forecaster? Does he mean the Prophets? For what reason would they order a Supercarrier away from Reach back to High Charity?_' Lasky thought alarmed. '_Something is off hereâ€|and I'm not even sure it's the Kings.'_'

Xuen continued. "The Solace's commander had followed his orders and prepared to leave. At that moment, Nathan and Jorge had leapt off the ship, detonating the slipspace bombâ€|the exact moment when the commander activated the driveâ€|"

"Creating a singularity," Admiral Ashdown finished. When he had graduated high school and was accepted into the Naval Academy on Titan, Saturn, he wanted to challenge himself and got a bachelor's in Interdisciplinary Studies with a minor in Slipspace Physics.

"I'm afraid so. The singularity created a slipspace bubble powerful enough to send a good bit of this ship to another galaxy. One of our science crews discovered the anomaly in our home system, and we sent a team to investigate. Imagine our shock to find 17 kilometers worth of what _used_ to be a starship in a large debris field and our first true confirmation of that we weren't alone in the universe. Why do you think Zestiria had slipspace travel, albeit slow compared to your drives, instead of using Element Zero like the races of the Citadel?" he asked rhetorically. He was correct, Vixa had an abundance of Element Zero, and the Zestirians were the reason the URSC understood Biotics to their extent, seeing as how they were part of their society for nearly 200 years! The only reason why they hadn't used the element for FTL travel was because up until recent centuries, the Draxians and Caleans had fought for dominance over the planet, much like the humans on Earth in the early 21st century before uniting to form the Systems Alliance. "Unfortunately, we found none of the crew alive, to be expected, really."

"How did you manage to transport this ship here without it being known?"

Xade actually chuckled. "1 kilometer at a time."

Ishigami burrowed her eyebrows. "Wait a minuteâ€|you took the ship apart, in space, brought it to your planet in _pieces_ and then _rebuilt_ it underground?!" She didn't know whether to be impressed by the sheer _insanity_ or dumbfounded at how they didn't have details leak.

"Not _quite_ as simple as that, but yesâ€|essentially," Xuen spoke casually.

"I see," Lasky nodded. "You managed to reverse-engineer Covenant tech. That's mighty impressive."

"Well, I wouldn't say much. The weapons are _still_ a mystery to us, but we were able to get a slipspace prototype to work. Our biggest breakthrough was when you arrived nine years ago. We were doing the best we could, but our translations of the communications were much more accurate seeing as we had living breathing speakers of it and we simply worked backwards, without your knowledge of course," Xade smirked, but then frowned. "If we managed to do itâ€|then I imagine the Citadel will be able toâ€|_eventually_. It's imperative that they

don't receive any of our military related technology, so we may build up our fleets and influence over the galaxy in the next coming decades and centuries, if need be."

Xavier nodded. "We're not idiots, your Majesties. Their civilization has been around longer than Humanity has even had nations and they outnumber us. We have a technological advantage, but something is going to leak, no matter how much we try to plug holes. It's inevitable." To Xavier and the rest of the URSC, the idea that the Citadel wouldn't eventually find a way to close the technological gap was not only the height of hubris, it was flat out moronic in virtually every way possible.

The UNSC closed the gap between the Covenant, albeit under trying circumstances, but the result was still the same. So the question remained: If the UNSC was able to do it, how could it be such a stretch to assume that a Galactic Civilization with hundreds of billions of citizens couldn't do the same without looking hypocritical in the process? Some asinine pro-human centric view that somehow overridden all forms of logic and reasoning? Humans can do it, but aliens can't?

Lasky hummed to himself. "In either case, I think it's more imperative now that our security becomes even tighter. Especially on ARCHON."

Ishigami had narrowed her eyes. '_It seems the SIGMA initiative will be even more imperative now than ever. Harperâ€¦you had better not fail me.' _

"Hold on, your Majesties," Cortana spoke up suddenly, as her avatar appeared on the Master Chief's forearm. "You still haven't told us one thing: How is that you are aware of the Spartans? As far as I'm aware the Covenant never did hold any records of specific. Spartans until Chief was onâ€œ"

"That's enough Cortana," Lasky interjected, sharply. The fewer people that knew about Halo, the better.

"That is where you are wrong Construct," Thel added in, prompting everyone to turn to him. "We did. We simply never cared."

Cortana seemed to be taken back, along with the rest of the URSC officials.

"Allow me to explain," Rtas spoke up, taking center stage. "Your Office of Naval Intelligence wasn't anywhere close to as clever as they thought they were," He growled with contempt. Even nearly a century and-a-half later, Rtas still had a grudge against Parangosky and Kilo-Five. "The only thing you managed to do was hide your worlds by the Cole Protocol, and even then, barely. Our devotion to the Forerunners and the Great Journey blinded us to treasures of human knowledge that our COM systems, manned by the Huragok, had picked up on. We had deemed you beneath us in every way, so unless our signal intelligence that we tracked that had been sent by ONI or anyone in the UNSC Navy picked up on a location of your human homeworld or colonies, everything was trivial and to be discarded without a second thought. Our leaders and fleet masters knew of many of your projects, including Infinity, maybe not all of the specifics, but we never really bothered to do much about it, if

at all. After all, we were decisively winning the war up until the Great Schism. If your projects didn't help then, why would they help decades later when we pushed you all the way back to your homeworld? Had ONI been foolish enough to give away the whereabouts of the Infinity, your so-called last bastion of humanity in case Earth fell, we would've jumped toward the Ort Cloud and destroyed the ship before it could finish construction. I am ashamed to say that even I ignored such details, in hot pursuit of waging our Holy War against the Humans of our galaxy, believing in the lies of those treacherous Prophets."

"I took control of a Covenant Ship, Imperial Admiral," Cortana spoke to Rtas. "If what you say is true, I would've known immediately and informed HIGHCOM the moment we got back to Earth!"

"What makes you think we stored those files in our main systems, construct?" Thel inquired rhetorically. "Unless you knew what you were looking for and you found its location physically onboard our starships and interfaced with it directly, no UNSC AI would ever have known. That was more the Huragok being overzealous in their caution, than anything to do with us."

There was complete silence in the room, as everyone in the UNSC was stunned. ONI intelligence had surmised that the Covenant made little use of signal intelligenceâ€"which was true on a technicality, but yet wrong concurrently.

Lasky pursed his lips and asked, "How long?"

"It is like he said, Admiral Lasky," Xuen smiled sadly. "They knew from the beginning."

"And you never told us about hisâ€|why?" Lasky growled staring down the Arbiter who remained stoic.

"And what logical reason would we have to tell you, Admiral? We were rebuilding the bridge for peace in those trying times after the war. If you knew we had passive intimate knowledge of your Spartans and secrets, I doubt you'd have continued your efforts in making lasting relations. Besides, we had much more pressing matters to contend to. Having those bits of intelligence was worthless when my people didn't know basic agriculture to feed themselves. The information was as useless then as we thought it was during the war: something to be discarded without a second thought. During our war, our goal was singular: find Earth and extinguish all human life."

John's eyes had widened behind his visor. His mind returned to a conversation with Captain Jacob Keyes on the Pillar of Autumn.

The Captain's eyes locked with hers. "I appreciate the concern, Cortanaâ€"but it's not up to me. The Protocol is clear. The destruction or capture of shipboard AI is absolutely unacceptable. That means you are abandoning this ship. Lock in a selection of emergency landing zones and upload them into my neural lace."

The AI paused then nodded. "Aye, sir."

"Which is where you come in," Keyes said as he turned to John. "Get Cortana off this ship. Keep her safe from the enemy. If they capture

her, they'll know everything. Force deployments, weapons research." A pause. "Earth." _

"_I understand, " the Spartan nodded. _

This new realization had particularly unnerved the Commander. Had the sacrifices humanity made been in vain? The only reason Humanity had survived so long was because of sheer _luck_?

"Do not be angry at the Sangheili, Admiral Lasky," Xuen interjected. "It has been decades since the war and you've fought well together in these trying times. The matter happened a century and a half ago. What's done is done."

Lasky sighed, and swallowed his pride. "I apologize, Thel. I meant no disrespect."

The Arbiter waved him off. "There is no need for such an apology. I did not take offense to your anger. Like his Majesty said, what's done is done."

"Yes, what's done is done," Xavier nodded, before looking back the _Long Night of Solace_. "The question remainsâ€|what now?"

"It's quite simple, honestly. We finish rebuilding it," Xuen stated plainly. "And commission it to be in service of the URSC." He looked towards Rtas and the Arbiter. "Or perhaps it can serve as the new flagship of the Empire Fleet."

General Hernandez raised an eyebrow. "Rebuild it? This thing isn't even finished? How large is it supposed to be?"

"Twenty-eight or twenty-nine kilometers, give or take," Jorge said plainly, answering for the kings.

With the exception of the UNSC and Separtists, everyone else's jaw dropped. "28 kilometers!? Jesus!"

"That's larger even than our own Olymâ€|"

Admiral Ishigami glared at General Hernandez. "General, if you want to keep your security clearance and not be court martialed and sent to prison, I'd highly suggest you shut your mouth right now."

Everyone in the room knew Ishigami was completely serious. Even though Fleet Admiral Ashdown outranked her on paper, she usually did as she pleased within reason. The only persons who had _real_ power over her were Director Xavier and the Minister of Defense, the only reason why was because not even Ishigami knew all of the URSC's secrets. Xavier had Blue Team perform a highly sensitive black ops mission during the invasion of Khar'shan and didn't bother to inform any of the Security Council, which spoke volumes.

Xavier shook his head. "What's the catch?"

Xade raised the lizard equivalent of an eyebrow. "There is none, Director. We've kept this ship locked away for nearly two decades. Consider it a token of gratitude for saving our planet and people from falling to the Batarians. We'll pitch in however we can to aid

in its reconstruction."

The director looked at his security council and then to the Arbiter, Lasky and Rtas. All of them nodded slowly.

"Very well, the URSC accepts," the black leader spoke diplomatically. "So long as you are aware, the origins of our "Great Leap Forward" In the 2050s are still highly classified to the greatest degree."

"We realize that Director," Xuen nodded seriously. "They will not say anything. I promise you that. "

"Let's hope so," Xavier replied evenly. Under normal circumstances, standard protocol was for OSI to quietly take care of anyone who the top brass so much as thought was coming close to discovering the truth. OSI had done it numerous throughout the URSC's existence and would continue to do so indefinitely. These however, were not normal circumstances and thus, Xavier would allow them to keep their lives until they gave him a reason not to.

"While I'm glad we all could agree, I do however suggest one thing," Zora said, speaking for the first time since he brought them down from the elevator.

"What pray tell is that, Draxian?" Rtas nearly snarled out.

"A name change," he grinned. "The Covenant doesn't exist anymore and the name doesn't really roll off the tongue. We know that the ships in the Empire have a different color scheme from when they were in the Covenant. Perhaps we can do the same with the Solace?"

A pause. "Perhaps, so. A later discussion." Xavier decided, instantly. Everyone else had acquiesced his decision without a second thought.

Nathan grimaced, not too sure how he felt about this whole ordeal. But in all honesty: he was in a new galaxy who knows how many millions light years from UNSC space. At that point, nothing should've surprised him anymore.

Besides one never knew when having an exceptionally large supercarrier on your side would come in handy

* * *

><p>Kronos System, URSC Daedalus

June 10**th****, 2168 **

**1300 Hours **

Kronos had been buzzing with activity for the past few weeks, and honestly, were it not for a few smokes and the occasional bottle of whiskey, Ambassador Shi Abu likely would've cracked under the stress. Xavier had ordered the Olympus to be moved to ARCHON, and subsequently, declassified the Daedalus' existence, from level 9 to 5, meaning a good many of the military were now aware of its existence. One the Daedalus left for Citadel space, it would go from 5 to 1, which was considered "Public". Thousands of bright cadets applied for a spot on the crew of the Infinity-class capital warship,

but only the best-of-the-best were chosen.

Turning to a view port, dozens of Pegasus dropships were making pick ups, from Isis-class light-carriers. The trio of carriers, the URSC _Sol's Fury_, URSC _Arcadia_, and the URSC _Point of Divergence_, had brought a bus load of Marines, TDST, Navy graduates, fighters, and supplies, straight to Kronos from Axiom Prime to stock the capital ship to brim. While they were not _quite_ as vast as the Leader-class Heavy Carriers, such as the URSC _Barack H. Obama_, URSC _John F. Kennedy_, URSC _Ronald W. Reagan_, _URSC _Churchill_, etc., any of the Isis-class carriers were larger than any Citadel dreadnought. However, next to the _Daedalus_, they seemed tiny and insignificant.

A beep indicated he had a holocall, disturbing him from his thoughts. He groaned, but answered anyhow. A plain brunette officer answered as a three dimensional image of her appeared, courtesy of the Daedalus' state-of-the-art hard light emitters.

"Ambassador, Captain Sejanus has arrived. Shall I direct him to you?"

"No, need Lieutenant, I'll meet him myself. Where is he located?"

"Hangar 30, near the top. All the others were busy with traffic, sir," she explained, calmly.

Of course there would be controlled chaos. In less than 24 hours, he would be sitting down at the negotiation table and they hadn't left yet.

"Very well," he replied. "That will be all. You're free for the rest of the day."

"Butâ€|sirâ€|ar-are you sure I canâ€|"

"Relaxâ€|it's all right. You've worked hard. Take the day off. If any of your superiors have a problem with tell them I'll send them back to Arcturus to let Admiral Ishigami deal with them."

The Lieutenant blinked heavily, but quickly regained her composure. "Understood, Ambassador." She saluted and which the drell smiled.

"Have a good day, Lieutenant."

She smiled back. "You too, sir."

Her image vanished, and the Ambassador made his way out of his office. He was treated with the respect of a Fleet Admiral on this ship and with good reason: Ambassador Abu, due to his position, was _enormously_ influential within the Unified Species Government, let alone the United Races Space Command! Not that he was the type of person to do so, but any officer dumb enough to cross him, he had the ability to revoke security clearances, deny promotions, influence jobs on the outside, and the like. That's how the URSC and USG worked: many single individuals were given enormous amounts of sway and power to eliminate as much red tape and bureaucracy, but, **only** if they used it wisely, as there were a number of

independent judicial reviews and councils to all controversial decisions. USG leaders, because of this were actual honest-to-god _leaders_ not just managers pretending to be one. Admiral Ishigami was the exception to this, rather than the rule. The _only_ person who kept her, and by extension the Office of Strategic Intelligence, in line was Xavier himself.

The doors had opened and Dorian Sejanus was waiting for the Ambassador, his uniform as perfectly pressed and polished, as it was when they met weeks ago.

"Captain, you're looking fairly handsome this fine evening," he smirked, hoping to fluster the Captain. He was met with disappointment.

"And good afternoon to you Ambassador," he replied succinctly. "While I appreciate the compliment, as hard as it may believe, I am not attracted to males. Drell or otherwise."

"...Jesusâ€|" he shook his head. "When are you going to take that stick out of your ass?"

Captain Sejanus' lips twitched into a small but nearly unnoticeable smirk. "I believe sticks do not grow inside the human anusâ€|_sir_."

Abu was left jaw slacked and dumbfounded. "Didâ€|did you just make a joke?" Dorian's face barely cracked a smile. Shi simply laughed out loud. "Oh, wow. We may just get along after all."

"Don't get your hopes up," Captain Sejanus rebuked sharply.

"You know I could kick you off this ship you know?"

"You could, but you won't," Sejanus retorted, calling his bluff.

"â€|You son of a bitch," he laughed, good-naturedly.

"Wouldn't be the first time I've been called that."

Abu shook his head, smiling. "No, I wouldn't be surprised at that at all." He turned around. "Comeâ€|let me give you short tour and overview of this ship."

Without a second thought, the two made their way to another elevator, and stepped inside.

"Any initial questions before I get started?"

Dorian had nodded. "A few. How much crew am I responsible for?"

"Needless to sayâ€|a lot. When we created the _Infinity_, decades ago, we used up a lot unneeded space, along with a plethora of other things. She's a powerful ship, but even she has flaws that could be improved upon. The Zestirians were instrumental in the _Daedalus'_ construction."

"How so?"

"Because, their entire society is structured and built on large grandiose infrastructure projects and they have buildings and landmarks that put the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World to shame. They built a goddamn _statue_ the size of the Empire State building in New York City on Earth just to prove that they _could_ the crazy bastard_s. _Ugh. I'm getting off topic. Anyhow, they know how to use space effectively, even more so than we do. We kept the external design of the _Infinity_, but the Draxians and Caleans both worked on the schematics with URSC engineers to _**completely**_ overhaul the internals, from the crew quarters, hangar bays, weapons armories, among a plethora of other things. The original Infinity was crewed by a total of 27,000 crewmembers, now with the internal redesigns? Now you're responsible for _90,000._"

Captain Sejanus' eyes widened. "90,000?!"

"Yup! Quite a lot, isn't it? No pressure though!"

"Thanksâ€|" Dorian drawled out. "That other shipâ€|the _Olympus_â€|I imagine it had the same internal redesigns as well?"

"It does," Abu confirmed. "The Olympus was designed to BE a fleet in and of itself. That's why its crew will be in the _seven-digit range_â€|"

Dorian swallowed hard. "Wowâ€|is this necessary?"

Ambassador Abu then grew very serious. "Yes. It is. We'll need every advantage we can get. We're a superior force, technologically, that much is obvious. But a lot of the public won't know the elephant in the room: our population. Even with the Batarians now under our thumb, our population barely tops out over 117 billion. Even with our efforts and encouragement to reproduce, we won't match them numbers wise for _centuries_!"

He was right. Ever since the URSC had formed in 2054, the population _exploded_ at the active encouragement of the government. Simply put the more children you had, the less taxes you paid, relatively speaking, with a few exceptions. Not only were children who didn't have a blood sibling in the URSC EXTREMELY rare, in some colonies, it was outright frowned upon, socially. The average run-of-the-mill USG citizen had at least four siblings, as a result of over one hundred years of societal, cultural, and social change.

"If they decide to throw bodies in the event of a war, unless we decide to crackâ€|" Abu stopped himself mid-sentence. Sejanus wasn't cleared for level 10 knowledge: including D-Heads. "â€|drastic action," he corrected himself. "We will lose. We'll take out a _shit load_ of them, but in the end, they'll win simply by proxy of having more men standing at the end of the conflict."

"Quantity has a quality all of its own," Dorian muttered, quoting Stalin. "Wait a minute, sir. A few months ago, me and three-dozen or so Captains and Commanders participated in a classified simulation of a Citadel-URSC War. Once we blockaded the Mass Relays, we were able to pretty much pick them off one-by-one and isolate them from each other. Aren't you being a bit pessimistic?"

"I am," Abu nodded. "But that simulation operates under the

assumption that they'll never understand slipspace or even finds a way to circumvent their strategic disadvantage. While it's certainly possible they won't, I wouldn't bet on it from any real world analysis. Their Mass Effect is different, and it's inferior to our own, but that ****DOES NOT**** make them stupid or incapable of acquiring greater knowledge. You can use a butter or steak knife to cut into a piece of poultry, obviously one is more effective, but does that mean you can't put the butter knife down and switch to using a steak once you realize that the butter knife doesn't cut as well?"

"An apt analogy. It seems you're taking this matter seriously, " Dorian noted.

"Of course we are. Contrary to what some believe, complete imbeciles running high on hubris and inflated egos DO NOT run the USG government. Our economy pales in comparison to their client races_, let alone all of them combined! These are facts and indisputable.

"You make it sound like we're the underdogs," he frowned. While he surely didn't like reports being sugarcoated, the way the Ambassador had phrased it had certainly unnerved him.

"We areâ€|from a certain point of view. We can't just take over the entire galaxy with military might alone. It doesn't work like that. It takes diplomacy, thinking with your head, making genuine friendships and allies, making rational decisions when possible, doing things for the long-term, negotiation, dedication, and good ol' fashioned hard work. The war with the Batarians was out of necessity and was easily able to do so for a variety of reasons. We engage war with the entire Citadel? That's insanity and anyone who suggests otherwise is a moron."

"So, I see. That's all I wished to know on that matter. What about this ships' defenses?"

The elevator opened and they could see the hangar bay, buzzing with activity. "She's got enough firepower to rival entire battle groups. Covering her hull is some of the most advanced shielding in the URSC. It takes 5 shots from an Atlas class dreadnought to bring them down. Two Series IX MAC guns at the bow of the ship and two Plasma Accelerator Cannons like on the Atlas-class dreadnoughts. Of course, she also comes with a shit ton of missile batteries with enough ordnance to destroy a continent. Once they're ready, Command will install a new class of nuclear and anti-matter ordnance. Like the Infinity, ten frigates are internally docked, ready to be deployed at a moment's notice."

"The Daedalus is able to hold over 4500 fighters of all types: Xiphos, Rapier, Broadsword, Cutlass and Greatsword."

"Am I to assume the Cutlass and the Greatsword are new fighters?"

"You're perceptive," Abu grinned. "The Rapier has been in service for nearly a hundred years, so we've been wanting to replace it for awhile. Same with the Katana, Broadwords, and Sabres."

"You make it sound like all of them will be retired simultaneously."

Abu nodded as a Pegasus flew overhead in the hangar to mark the arrival of several squads of Marines who had just transferred to the Daedalus. He then smirked. "Do you want to see them?"

"Waitâ€¦they're _here_?"

"Totally locked down out of sight, but yes, several prototypes are here."

Sejanus almost cracked a smile. Ambassador Abu was breaking down his wall little by little. "Of course, sir. I'd be honored."

The Ambassador lead the Captain of the Daedalus to another lift and spoke out loud. "Hangar X-626," Abu called out to the terminal, and his official picture, along with his security clearance of "10" appeared in the OLED display near the elevator doors, with a green check mark. Dorian's picture appeared afterwards along with his security clearance of "9" and instead of a green check mark, a red "X" appeared.

A computerized voice answered. "I'm sorry Ambassador, it appears Captain Sejanus is not cleared for entrance into Hangar X-626."

Abu rolled his eyes. "Director's Override, Abu, Curasis Shi."

It took a moment, but eventually, a green check mark appeared on the terminal. "Access Granted." As the elevator went down, Sejanus turned to him, his eyes narrowed.

"I wasn't cleared for fighters on my _own_ ship?"

"Don't get your panties in bunch, Captain," Shi replied dismissively. "I had so much work to do, I had forgotten to override the clearance. Don't take it personally."

"â€¦"

The door's opened to a secret hangar bay, X-626: used by Infinity-class warships to carry classified cargo, Levels 8 and above. Two different fighters were hanging on either side of each other from the ceiling from a crane, about 10 meters off the deck floor. The launch bays' entrance were blacked out from both the inside and out, so neither the crew chiefs inside nor any dropships flying from the outside could get a passing glance at the precious cargo.

"To your left, would be the XF-52 Cutlass," Abu reported. "Multi-role strike fighter, designed with two philosophies, close air support for ground troops, while still being capable of dogfighting in space. While it's not going to replace the Xiphos, it can still get the job done if one isn't nearby and they can spare the ammunition."

"To your right would be the XF-90 Greatsword or the "Overseer" as some of our pilots have named it," Abu grinned. "You're looking at probably one of the most classified weapon systems in existence, Captain. You should feel honored."

Sejanus nodded. "I am. However, I'm curious of one thingâ€¦what makes

these fighters that much superior to the Rapier, which has served us well for decades?"

"Still as skeptical as always, aren't you Captain?" said a familiar voice, to Captain Sejanus. He turned to his left and was surprised to see a young fighter pilot, who had the rank of Major on his shoulder.

"Captain Lector?" Sejanus spoke in mild surprise.

"Major, now, sir," Lector grinned. Marcus Jerome Lector was a handsome flying ace of East-African descent, specifically, Kenyan. The Dark-skinned pilot was only 29 years old and yet his hair was already showing signs of greyness, even despite his attempts to dye it.

"You know Major Lector?" Ambassador Abu, asked surprised.

"Of course, I do, sir," Lector smirked. "This geezy bastard was the reason the URSC recruiters gave me a chance. Never would've gotten through the Academy without 'em."

"You do know that I outrank you still," Dorian lightly joked with a straight face, but actually smiled, good-naturedly afterwards. Shi's jaw dropped in disbelief. '_He smiles for HIM!? Are you _fucking_ kidding me?!' _

"Yes, but then again, there's no other pilot you'd trust to get you out of a jam so you know you'll deal," he shot back.

"Seems you let graduating at the top of your class go to your head."

"Says the man who wants to be Director and replace Xavier," Marcus retorted, continuing their banter.

There was a beat.

"All rightâ€¦you got me there. TouchÃ©," Dorian conceded. He held out his hand. "It's good to see you, Marcus. I'm glad you're doing well. I'm proud of you," he smiled.

Marcus took the man's hand and grasped it firmly, shaking it, inwardly beaming at the praise. "Thank you, sir. You have no idea how much that means to me," he told him genuinely, his cheeks burning from blushing.

"Wow, no wonder I didn't have contact with you for the past few months. Guess the brass cut off all communication?"

"Yes, sir," Marcus frowned, apologetically. "After the battle of Zestiria, I was one of the first pilots to arrive en-masse over Kastella. Some OMEGA soldiers were pinned down by artillery, a column of tanks, and dozens of Special Forces Batarians. Normally, a walk in the park for the OMEGA, right? Wrong. I'm not at liberty to reveal everything, but let's just say there were some _real_ close calls involving another squadron of enemy fighters. They called in an air strike, and I delivered the blow, saving their hides after I took down those other fighters. I get an email from Admiral Ishigami and the rest, as they say, is history."

"Wow," Dorian nodded appreciatively. "Tell me you got a pretty nice call sign from it."

"Of course, sir! They're calling me "Zenith" now! One who stands at the top of his game!" he cheered enthusiastically.

"Heh, I always knew you had it in you, son," He smiled softly.

"I know, that's why I owe you everything. I would've never gotten this far without you. Thank you."

"It's nothing, Marcus. Come on," he grabbed him by the shoulder and led him off. "Enough about work, tell me how Sarah isâ€|"

'_His file didn't mention anything about having a protÃ©gÃ©,' _Abu had noted, as he watched mentor and student catch up. The drell had to smile. Dorian seemed to be a completely different person around Marcus. Conversely, when Marcus called the Captain "sir" it was out of genuine respect, not because military courtesy demanded it. '_So it seems there is far more to you than meets the eye.'_

His communications Smart Watch beeped. Curious, he answered and his wrist projected an image of a Sangheili officer.

"Senior Shipmaster? What can I do for you?"

"My liege, all teams are prepped and ready. We're ready to leave at your command. My deckmasters and Junior Ship Masters are ready to follow your commands to the letter."

"Very well, Shipmaster," Abu nodded. "We will leave at once. I will arrive on the bridge soon enough along with Captain Sejanus."

The Sangheili had beaten his chest. "By your word, Ambassador." His image had vanished.

"Captain, Major," Abu had called out. "It's show time. We must leave at once!"

Dorian groaned, but nodded nonetheless. "I guess you'll share with me what these fighters can do another time?"

"What's not classified, of course," he half-joked.

"I'll look forward to it, regardless," Sejanus smiled. They both shook each other's hands. "Good luck, Marcus."

"Go make history, sir. He chose you for a reason. Time to show him why."

"Yeah, I guess I do," Captain Sejanus smiled, he almost turned to leave, before asking one final question. "Are you still going to the A.R.C Championship in July? I heard Eden Prime is hosting this year."

Marcus grinned. "Wouldn't miss it for the world, sir!"

"Wouldn't mind me tagging along? After we hit the Citadel, I'm sure the crew would love some shore leave."

If it was even possible, Marcus' smile seems to grow even wider. "You mean it? I know you couldn't go before because you had duties and all that, then the war, the rebelsâ€œ"

"Marcus, breathe!" Dorian laughed, slightly, amused by his protÃ©gÃ©'s fluster.

"Sorry, sirâ€œ|I got real excited for a moment," he scratched the back of his head, clearly embarrassed as if were a young teen again, when he first met Dorian.

"That you did," he shook his head. "Look, I really got to go, so I'll talk to you soon, all right so we can really catch up. "

"Count on it!"

Captain Sejanus left without another word, following Ambassador Abu.

* * *

><p>URSC Daedalus , Captain's Cabin

June 10**th****, 2168**

**1600 Hours **

"And you're confident this method will work?" Xavier's holographic form said as he reviewed everything of note on a tablet in his office. To his left was Admiral Ishigami, leader of the Office of Strategic Intelligence, and to his right, was Fleet Admiral Ashdown, the Chief of Naval Operations. They were going over last minute details for a formal contact. Xavier himself would've done the negotiations, but it was too much of a security risk, and were the aliens stupid enough to assassinate him or even attempt to do so, to say the USG citizens would be livid would be an understatement. War was practically guaranteed.

Abu nodded. "Yes, sir, I do," he replied confidently. "These people have vast amount of political experience and its best to be cautious and whatnot."

"And what of the information you plan to reveal to them?" Ashdown asked coldly, narrowing his eyes. He was a member of the Security Council, like Ishigami, so technically, Ambassador Abu couldn't do a damn thing to him.

Abu pursed his lips to prevent himself from sneering. From a professional point of view, he had no problem with Ashdown as the man was a cunning and brilliant officerâ€œyou're not in charge of hundreds of _trillions_ of credits worth of assets by being incompetentâ€œ" but the man still made no secret of his displeasure for Abu, mainly because of his age. Ambassador Abu was barely thirty-eight years old, yet had power and influence sapient beings thrice his age wished they could have.

"Admiralâ€œ|I'm not a fool. I recognize that there are certain bits of information we cannot disclose. What I DO reveal is already public knowledge and can be easily looked up on the extranet."

Ashdown huffed, but nodded nonetheless. "Very well, then," he conceded.

"I appointed you for a reason, Shi," Xavier stated with confidence. "I know you'll represent the URSC to the best of your ability and you have my full faith and confidence."

Shi bowed, formally. "Thank you, sir."

"Now, then, before you're off, are there any questions?"

"I have one sir," Captain Sejanus spoke up before striding towards where Abu was and stood confidently at parade rest in front of his superiors.

Xavier raised an eyebrow. "Ahâ€|you'reâ€|Captain Dorian Sejanus, right?"

Sejanus nodded. "Yes, sir," he tersely replied with a hint of envy. Oh how he desired to sit in Xavier's "throne" so desperately.

"I see. What is your question, Captain?"

"If the unthinkable were to happen and negotiations fall apart, what do you wish for me and my crew to doâ€|sir."

Xavier glanced at Ishigami and then at Ashdown. They both nodded. The black man turned serious. "What do you do you ask? Should negotiations fail and Abu's life is threatened. I wantâ€|no. I'm _ordering_ you to reduce the Citadel and the Citadel Defense Fleet to _ash_. The _Daedalus_ should allow you to do so with ease."

Sejanus nodded, not even remotely surprised. Xavier had the reputation for being one of the kindest and most benevolent leaders in the history of mankind itself, yet when his people were threatened wouldn't hesitate to do what was necessary. The Batarians found out the hard way.

"I understand."

"You have your orders, Captain, Ambassador. We'll be in touch within 72 Standard Earth Days. Don't disappoint us." All three of their images vanished simultaneous.

"And you want to replace him?" Abu joked, snickering. Sejanus remained stoic, and didn't bother to respond. Marcus was the only person who knew the _real_ reason why he wanted to be Director, and as far as he was concerned it would stay that way.

"Will you say anything to the crew?"

"I'm not one for grandiose speeches, Ambassador. Let's get the job done. I can get to know them all at a later date. Now is certainly not the time." _'Besidesâ€|I have a championship game I need to watch with my protÃ©gÃ©. If these alien bastards make me miss itâ€|there will be hell to pay!'_

"All right," Abu nodded and called for the bridge. "Deckmaster! Jump us to the Widow System. Let's make history."

The engines of the Daedalus revved up as the ship was released from its holding cranes in a dry dock. Everyone on the ship now knew that the ship was about to perform a slipspace jump and would be arriving at the Citadel in a few hours. The crews of the Infinity-class warship all clapped, celebrating the unofficial commissioning of the ship as it sailed out into the void for several thousand kilometers. Internally, teams of engineers were doing hundreds of tests.

"We are a go, Captain! She's 100% operational!"

Sejanus nodded. "Take us into slipspace, Lieutenant!"

"Aye, aye!"

The slipspace portal appeared off the bow of the ship, and the 6.3-kilometer ship vanished into the eleven dimensions of slipspace.

* * *

<p>Citadel

June 10**th****, 2168 URSC Standard**

**1300 hours Citadel Standard Time **

Jorban Sykes, sat staring out in the void of space with an extremely bored look on his face. The Turian had been an officer for C-Sec for nearly a decade and was able to pull some strings to get a job at flight control. It was excruciatingly mundane, but he'd rather be bored than shot at in the Wards. Spending almost a decade as a Special Response Officer had nearly broken him and almost caused him and his mate to separate permanently. They were still rocky, but things were steadily improving, much to his delight.

Jorban closed his eyes and almost fell asleep before he was jerked awake, by a hand on his shoulder. He looked to his left to see his asari-coworker, Tryx.

"Spirits, Tryx!" he gasped out. "Don't scare me like that!"

Tryx had laughed, amused. "Sleeping on the job again? I swear you spend more time unconscious than you do landing flights," she joked.

Jorban grumbled. "Yeah, yeah. Can you blame me? Nothing ever happens! I know we're supposed to have a diplomatic arrival, but that's not for another several hours andâ€"

Several alarms on the panels in front of them started to go off. "Huh?" Jorban spoke dumbly, as he typed in a few responses. "What theâ€|? Is this thing broken?"

"What do you mean?" Tryx asked curiously, looking down at the console.

"Says here an object is nearing the Citadelâ€|but I don't seeâ€"

"Sergeant Jorban!" Another C-Sec officer called out. "We're being hailed!"

"Hailed? By whom?"

"Unknown, sir! Their communications algorithms barely function with ours!"

Tryx and Jorban stared at each other. Could this be the diplomatic party? But they weren't supposed to be here for hours at least! How could they have gotten here so quickly?! Even the fastest STG ships couldn't make it to the Citadel in this brief period of time!

Jorban cleared his throat and pressed an icon. "This is Sergeant Jorban Sykes of Citadel Control. To whom am I speaking?"

"This is Ambassador Shi Abu of the United Races Space Command, on board the URSC Daedalus. On behalf of the Unified Species Government I come in peace for a formal establishment of relations with the Citadel and its Council."

Jorban, despite his shock, was able to compose himself. "Very well, Ambassador. I will inform the Council at once," he replied, motioning to his other officers to let the Councilors know of their arrival immediately. "You are cleared for docking at Pier 47, Ambassador. I welcome you and your species to the Citadel."

"I'm afraid docking is impossible, Sergeant," came the reply of the drell.

"Excuse me?" Jorban replied, confusion evident on his face.

"You'll understand within the next few seconds." The transmission had cut off from there, leaving a bewildered Turian officer.

Turning in his seat, he glanced at Tryx. "Docking impossible? Pft, barely known this species for less than a few mini-cycles and already they annoy me and—" he stopped himself mid-sentence seeing a look of terror on the asari's face.

"No-no—that's—that's impossible!" she uttered incoherently, shaking her head frantically, trying to get the sight out of her mind.

"Tryx? Are you okay?" he inquired, genuinely concerned for his co-worker.

"Uh..Jo-Jo-Jorban—you might want to turn back—ar-around," she stuttered out as her eyes were as wide as dinner plates. He glanced at the rest of the crew in Citadel Control and every single one of them were staring out into the void all of the color draining from their skin, mirroring the actions of the asari.

"What is it now?" Sighing, he turned around as she had suggested—and nearly lost control of his bowel movements and his heart skipped a beat. He stepped back in sheer panic, as his mind could barely comprehend the sight before him. An absolutely enormous ship, six times the size of the Destiny Ascension sailed toward the Citadel, escorted by ten smaller ships. The ship was pitch black, and from preliminary scans, detected no onboard element zero at

all!

There was only one appropriated response.

"What in the name of Spirits is THAT THING?!"

* * *

><p>Eden Prime

**Capital City of Constant **

June 10**th****, 2168**

Constant, second only to a few cities on Earth and Zestiria, was easily one of the largest in USG space. The city stood tall and proud as a testament toward humanity's investment in its colonies. Eden Prime was unquestionably the most developed colony under the control of the URSC. The extremely fertile soil proved be invaluable in the population explosion after the "Great Leap Forward". In addition to feeding its 6.5 billion inhabitants, due to the colony's extensive use of vertical farming(over 10,000 of them scattered across the planet) and crop rotation, Eden Prime was a net exporter of all kinds of food, with some colonies in the USG relying extensively on trade with fertile world. In addition, Eden Prime was also an immensely popular tourist destination and many of the URSC Army dreamed of being at one of hundreds of garrisons located planetside.

"Such a beautiful city," a female operative spoke as she took in the sights of Constant from atop of a suite, courtesy of their "employer". Even with her pale skin, the rays from Eden Prime's star, Utopia, barely fazed her.

"Allison, now is not the time for sight seein'. Da boss, assigned us a job, eh?" A massive human male, about six feet and a half with very broad shoulders spoke in a heavy Southern drawl, sitting his bag on the bed of their suite. He was dressed in a simple tank top and jeans, having removed his equipment for the moment.

"Barrett, I told youâ€¦call me Allie," the woman insisted. "Allison sounds soâ€¦formal."

Barrett grunted in response, but said nothing. "Sorry, ma'am was just how my mama raised me. Old habits die hard."

Allie rolled her eyes playfully. "Don't worry, I was just kidding." She then grew serious and pressed an icon on the windows, dinting the room so it was nearly as dark as the night. "So, who's our target?"

Barrett chuckled. "Target? Lord a'mercy, Allison. This ain't an assassination mission, this hear is just a simple recon. Nuthin' more."

"Is that so? Jack must beâ€¦"

"We don't speak his name," Barrett warned, half glaring at his partner.

"Ugh, right. The Illusive Man, then. Anyhow, like I askedâ€¦who's our

target?"

"This young lady, here." With a flick of his wrist, a holographic form of an attractive fourteen-year-old female teenager appeared. Her pitch-black hair was tied in a pony tail and her eyes were sapphire blue, the color of the oceans. Complementing her athletic figure was a dark plain hoodie, jeans, and running shoes. From her skin tone, it was apparent that the teenager was of mixed ancestry, likely Caucasian and African. Above her, was the target's name: Alyxandria Ashelia Shepard.

Allie's eyebrow shot up in surprise. "Shepard? Isn't she one of the top candidates for the SIGMA program? Why? She doesn't seem like anything special."

"Indeed," Barrett confirmed. "As for why? Her mother is a respected member of the URSC Navy and her father is the most infamous Titan Pilot in the galaxy."

"Wait. She's HIS daughter?!" Allie cried out in shock. "He managed to sire a child?! HOW?! That shouldn't have been possible afterâ€"

"I'm aware of Colonel Greystone's origins, Allie," he cut her off. "He's a Prototype, but it remains to be seen if Alyxandria will inherit any of hisâ€|gifts. But that's neither here nor there. We have our orders. We must observe Shepard before OSI gets to her first. The Illusive Man is retiring from the military to accelerate his plans. He won't have access to classified information much longer."

"Not like he could stay, anyhow. That bitch Ishigami doesn't trust him," she growled with contempt. She despised Admiral Ishigami beyond logical reasoning. "Where do we start? She could be anywhere."

"Oh, I wouldn't say that, ma'am," Barrett smirked. Alyx's hologram switched to a three-dimensional image of an intricate racing route. "I hear she's a fan."

"The A.R.C Championship, huh?" she smirked and sat on the bed. "Hot damn, Barrett we hit the jackpot! We can observe Shepard andâ€|"

"All the other SIGMA candidates here on Eden Prime," Barrett grinned back.

While Ambassador Abu would be negotiating with the Citadel Council to establish formal relations and bring in a new age for the United Races Space Command, near the homefront sinister plots were being unraveled.

And at the center of it allâ€|was a young fourteen-year-old teenager.

* * *

><p>And that's a wrap! I was going to put the negotiations in this chapter, but good lord in heaven would this chapter be over 20,000 words. So I simply am going to break it up in half. The next chapter is on its way, so don't worry! You should see another update, bar a

catastrophic event, late June at the latest!<p>

Jack Harper has made his move! What are the origins of Tyson? Why is Harper so interested? Keep reading to find out! Strap your seatbelts boys and girls, because you're in for one hell of a ride! I've been waiting for this story arc to start since the beginning.

By the way, if you submitted an OC to be Shepards Partner, I need you to send an updated profile, ASAP taking into account recent story events. ****If you do not send an updated profile, you will NOT be considered for selection.**** _Period. No exceptions. So if you want to be even considered, an update is necessary. This obviously doesn't apply to anyone who will consider giving a profile after this chapter.

Codex:

****SIGMA Program****: The ****S**pecial ****I**ntelligence ****G**athering and bio-****M**echanically ****A**ugmented-force******** is a concept created by Admiral Ishigami in the wake of the URSC-Batarian war. Whereas the OMEGA was the URSC's super soldiers, the SIGMA would be the URSC's super spies able to operate deep behind enemy lines for years at a time with little support. The program is classified level 10, and is believed to be an evolution of the N7 program, but instead of adults, the program would use teenagers, who volunteered for the program once invited.**

****A.R.C- Aeronautical Racing Circuit****- The A.R.C is the URSC's most popular professional sporting even drawing billions of viewers annually. The A.R.C, like its namesake involves racers piloting aircraft at high speeds with a goal of being first at the finish line. Because of the high amount of skill needed to fly an ARC jet, the URSC Air Force directly recruits from the ARC, thus, there is a constant need for new pilots allowing newcomers who want to become professional racers their chance to shine. The ARC championship is held annually and a total of 32 racers will race around designated air space to crown who is the ARC Champion! The ARC is regulated heavily by the URSC Air Force Aviation Administration, to prevent unfair advantages and to make the sport as safe as humanly possible.

****X-52 Cutlass****-Designed with two main philosophies in mind, providing close air support for ground troops while still being capable dogfighters in space combat. As such the XF-52 is equipped with 2 sets of engines. The first is a thrust vectoring ion drive. This allows the fighter to hover and make side to side strafing runs for dealing with enemy ground vehicles while still able to travel up to Mach 6 inside atmosphere to deal with enemy aerial fighters. The second engine is a reversed engineered impulse drive from the Covenant Seraph. This gives the Cutlass nearly unparalleled speed and maneuvering in space.

As for weaponry, Cutlass boasts a rotary 45mm cannon based on the 20th century GAU-8 Avenger. It also has two prototypes Grindell/Galilean Nonlinear Pulse that could be fired in rapid pulses rather than a concentrated beam. On its 18 wing pylons and 2 internal weapons bays it could carry any number of guided munitions.

Perhaps the most impressive innovation is the small Zestirian designed Element Zero Core. This means that a carrier with XF-52s

could jump in the outer edges of a system and its fighters jump themselves closer to the engagement.

X**-90 Greatsword**- Error...

Access Terminatedâ€|

15. Ad Referendum

**Mass Effect: The New Journey**

Chapter Fifteen: _Ad Referendum_

All right, I promised you guys that this chapter would come out soon and I'm hoping I didn't disappoint!

I just want to say for those who sent updated profiles, thank you, for the amount of details you put. It warms my heart that you're mentioning small details that showed you actually _paid attention_! Believe me when I say that goes a _**long**_ way in determining whom I will eventually pick. But you're all still in for a surprise. One reviewer, I won't say who, figured it out already and he's agreed not to say anything, but let's just say your hard work in these profiles will beâ€|_rewarded_. ;)

And to add on to something, got a review from an anonymous user "RandomReader" who put some things in perspective for me, even though there are a plethora of critiques I disagree with, personally, I know I can definitely improve on my expository dialogue and character speech patterns. So I'll definitely address some of your concerns as best I possibly can in the story.

With that being said, let's go!

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><p>Citadel

June 10**th****, 2168 URSC Standard**

**1310 Hours Citadel Standard **

"And that's all you managed to recover?" Councilor Sparatus inquired calmly as General Septimus Oraka sat in his office as they were discussing the valuable intelligence that was gained by the HUNTERS on Khar'shan. They were relatively safe to talk freely amongst themselves. Not even the Special Task Group was brazen enough to bug a Councilor's private chambers, due to the political fallout if exposed.

"Yes. Unfortunately, we weren't able to commandeer a corpse of one of their super soldiers for an autopsy, but we did manage to steal one of their infantry troops'. Thankfully, the armor was still intact,

even after Nihlus disposed of him. Their shielding is fascinating. Omnicore Shielding can only be used by HUNTERS, yet all of their soldiers have shielding that can block both our kinetic weapons and energy projectiles."

"How long do you expect to be able to reverse-engineer it? The First Task Group could use an upgrade."

General Oraka shook his head. "I'm not certain. It's abundantly obvious that these humans put security measures in place to ensure their weapons and the enemy couldn't easily understand technology unfamiliar. So we're being cautious as of the moment, so we don't inadvertently trigger a system meltdown. The fact that we haven't so far is a Spirits given miracle in and of itself."

Sparatus had grunted. "Soâ€|we got luckyâ€|again."

"Indeed, so," Septimus had responded gravely.

"Very well, then," he acknowledged leaning back. "We have nearly all the time in the galaxy to improve and match the humans. I'm in no rush. Tell me, what of Renegade?"

"They're doing relatively well, physically. All of their repairs are complete and they've resumed combat training in the simulation with no ill effects. Remarkable soldiers they are and an example all Turians should strive for."

"I see. And emotionally?" Honestly, Sparatus didn't truly care, but he felt obligated to ask the inquiry anyhow.

General Oraka sighed. "I'mâ€|not sure. I'm concerned about Silviri. She grew up with Kryses and they've fought and trained together for decades. And nowâ€|he's gone. She already despised non-Turians and with his death, I fear her hatred will only grow fiercer, the longer this pseudo-conflict with the humans persists. I wish I could comfort her," he replied with a frown.

"Then put her down if she becomes a problem," Sparatus replied coldly. "It's bad enough I have to deal with the asari's sanctimonious hypocrisy, but a HUNTER going off the rails? That is something I will NOT allow. I have no time to repair a broken weapon."

Even Septimus couldn't help but recoil in horror and shock. "Councilor, you cannot be serious?!"

"Do I look like I'm joking to you?" Sparatus retorted with a dismissive snarl, standing up from his chair and making his way toward a viewport, which showed a breathtaking view of the Citadel Presidium. "Let's not pretend we didn't do what we had to do or that we're saints. We've lied to over three thousand families about what transpired to their children and turned their sons and daughters into killing machines from the age of eight years old. So in light of that, please spare me the paternal sentimentality, General. It's forty years too late for that. They were built to be instruments of our will and they will die the same way. For the honor of the Hierarchy."

"Iâ€|understand, sir," General Oraka spoke, politely, but inwardly

the Turian General was practically seething in rage. '_You _bastard. _How _**dare**_ you?! You only see__** MY**__ HUNTERS as disposable tools? You and the rest of this Spirit's forsaken Council have tried my patience long enough. No more!' _

Councilor Sparatus was completely unaware of the morbid thoughts and Machiavellian scheming running through the Turian Hierarchy's most decorated officer.

"Councilor, you have Citadel Control on the line," spoke a voice over the intercom.

"Put them through."

"Councilor, sir, the diplomatic party has arrived!"

"How? This soon?"

"Yes, I'm afraidâ€", " His voice was overshadowed by the shouting of Sergeant Jorban.

"What in the name of Spirits is that thing?!"

Both Turian leaders glanced at each other, before rushing out of the room. Turning to the left they could see a number of C-Sec guards rushing down the hallways, seemingly ignoring the two.

"You there!" Councilor Sparatus called out to an asari C-Sec officer, who stopped midstride to salute her superior. "What's going on?"

"Sir, an unknown vessel has appeared outside the Citadel. It's enormous! People are panicking in the streets, causing pandemonium," the officer replied in a hurried tone. "Our defense fleet is taking up positions andâ€"

"They're WHAT?!" Sparatus eyes widened. "On whose authority?"

"Councilor Tevos, sir," she replied, gulping.

"That dammedâ€|nevermind! I need you to get me a priority line to Admiral Decius and I mean NOW!" Sparatus roared in rage.

"Ye-yes, sir! Follow me," she stuttered out and the officer and Sparatus had practically sprinted around the corner, leaving General Oraka alone with his thoughts.

Making sure no one was watching, General Oraka hid in a corner and brought out his omnitool. "Silas, give me an operational view of the Citadel and Widow System," he ordered his personal VI.

"General, I must caution you to remember that you are within confines of the Citadel," Silas warned him.

"I'm aware. I'll be done before anyone in C-Sec catches on."

"Very well, sir. Accessingâ€|.Access granted."

On his omnitool a projection of the Citadel, its defense fleet and

the diplomatic party was observed. Seeing the Daedalus, Septimus' jaw dropped. 'That shipâ€¦impossible. Why would they bring such a monstrosity for_â€¦' His eyes widened in realization. Now it made sense. The humans were aiming for peace, yet showing they wouldn't hesitate to go to war. And this ship, nearly six times larger than the Destiny Ascension, was to hammer the point in home that the Council was negotiating from a position of weakness, not strength. It was a tactic used during the Unification Wars on Palaven millennia ago.

Septimus had to admit he was impressed at the amount of foresight the URSC had. That all being said, they were still in Citadel territory, and while he despised the Council, they were shrewd politicians and excellent negotiators. 'Let's see how well you do with this challenge Councilors?' he smirked, looking down at the Presidium. Civilians were in state of panic and C-Sec had mobilized entire divisions of officers to keep the peace. Clearly the reaction to seeing the Daedalus_ wasâ€¦not positive, to say the least.

'Hmâ€¦these humans presence seems to have unnerved the population while impressing our leadershipâ€¦I could use this,' he grinned again.

"Silasâ€¦what time is it on Thessia?" he inquired.

"Current time on Tamaris, Thessia is 0920 local time," she answered immediately.

"Good. I'm heading back to my ship. Have my crew prepare a conference call."

"For whom?"

"Admiral Mirova T'Nara. There's been a change of plans. And I believe these humans will assist usâ€¦" a predatory smile carved its way on his face as he stared toward the Daedalus_. "â€¦Unknowingly or not."

* * *

><p>URSC Daedalus

June 10**th****, 2168 URSC Standard**

1400 Citadel Standard Time

Amabassador Abu took one final look in the mirror and adjusted his tie in a double Windsor. He wasn't sure of the fashion sense of the Citadel races, but he'd be damned if he didn't look his best. Currently, he was dressed in a plain black suit, with a white undershirt, and black tie with white stripes. Of course the entire suit, while undeniably human in terms of style, was tailored toward drell physiology, and the Ambassador had access to some of the best tailors in the USG. Combined with the drell's natural good looks, it wasn't a stretch to say that he could be a cover model on magazine.

Smiling he turned around. "So, how do I look?" he grinned, towards a Navy ensign.

"Amazing, sir," she said quickly, without thinking. Her eyes widened and she tried to allay, "uhâ€¦I meanâ€¦good. You look good!"

Abu simply laughed and waved her off, not wanting to embarrass her any further. "Why thank you," he smiled. "Talk about a close call, huh?"

She nodded. "Yes. For a minute I thought this was all going to go south," she frowned. The Citadel Defense fleet, were it not for the timely order from Councilor Sparatus had nearly had a stand off, which would've ended, undoubtedly with the entire Citadel being massacred in retaliation. Thankfully, cooler heads had prevailed and the defense fleet was called off. However, the URSC wasn't foolish. They knew they were being watched like hawks for any type of offensive. They kept their distance, barely, but they kept it nonetheless.

'_Perhaps bringing the Daedalus was a mistake,' _Abu thought critically, pacing back and forth. '_No matter. It's too late now. I have a job to do. Time to see what these seasoned politicians can do.' _Even Abu couldn't help but tremble in excitement at the prospect of negotiating and making history. This was a pivotal moment, and he wouldn't let the URSC down.

"Shall we?" Abu said with a smile. His assistant smiled back at him and lead him out of his private room towards the hangar bay where a Pegasus would escort them to the Citadel.

"Ambassador," a voice called out in the elevator. It was Captain Sejanus, from the bridge.

"Captain?" He rose a brow.

"I want to sayâ€¦God speed."

"Thank you, Captain," the drell nodded appreciatively. "Remember, our codeword. If I say itâ€¦"

There was a pause.

"I'll turn the station to ashâ€¦as ordered."

"Good. This won't take long, I promise. I'll see you when I can."

"Likewise, sir. Sejanus out."

Abu took a deep breath, and steeled his resolve as the elevator opened. As expected, a Pegasus was waiting for him, along with his escort: two human marines, a Sangheili Field Master, a Caele and Draxian from the Royal Special Task Force, an Unggoy minister, and finally, his own species in the form of two N7 drell. The Citadel had allowed him an escort of up to ten persons; however, he _deliberately_ went for a smaller escort, numerically wise, to give the impression that he didn't _need_ their maximum allotted protection. That, and the escort were diverse to show off every sapient species under the jurisdiction of the United Races Space Command.

"My liege, we are ready to go at your command," the Sangheili, clad in gold armor, spoke collectively for the group, beating his chest.

"Thank you Field Master," Abu replied appreciatively. "Let's not dawdle. We've had enough setbacks," the drell derisively added. Strolling past the alien entourage, he gracefully stepped up on the dropship and took a seat, closing his eyes.

"You heard the Ambassador!" the field master barked at his escort. "Let us make haste!"

The escort scrambled and followed their orders to the letter. Abu had to stop himself from laughing, seeing as how he was aware that the Field Master had a softer side that few of his subordinates never saw. With that amused thought, he took another deep breath as the Pegasus rose from the docking bay's deck, revved up its engines, and zoomed its way out into the void of space, heading for the Citadel.

* * *

><p>"What in the name of Spirits were you thinking, Councilor?!" Councilor Sparatus snarled in rage, staring the impassive asari down.<p>

She narrowed her eyes. "What I thought was necessary. How was I supposed to know they would sendâ€|thatâ€|that THING to the Citadel?!" she fired back, not willing to back down from a confrontation if it came down to it.

"You nearly caused a war, Councilor! Don't you see that?"

"Of course I do, now," she replied tersely. "I take full responsibility. I acted impulsively and that I do regret." Whether or not her apology was genuine, Sparatus honestly couldn't fathom, but he accepted it nonetheless.

"Both of you, be reasonable," Valern told them both sternly. "We have a lot to discuss with this new species. We have to project an image of a united Council, no matter howâ€|untrue it may seem," he advised, cautiously looking towards the two of them. Tensions were quietly growing between the both asari and Turian ever since the revelation of the HUNTER program had come to light. As concerning as it was, now was certainly _not_ the time for petty grudges.

"We cannot underestimate them," Valern warned. "Under any circumstances."

Tevos snorted, annoyed at what she thought was patronizing. "Please. The only thing I have to worry about is cleaning up Sparatus' mess andâ€|"

"How dareâ€|"

"ENOUGH!" Valern barked, now fully irritated. "Councilor, I understand you feel contempt for the HUNTER program, truthfully, so do I, but you have to put this behind you for the sake of these negotiations! You're acting like a child, and considering how old you are, that's pretty damning in itself!" He didn't allow her to retort

and he turned to the Turian Councilor. "And you, Sparatus. Don't pretend that just because we aren't going to shut the HUNTERS down that we are condoning what you've done. Like Tevos said months ago, were the humans not so powerful with their own super soldiers, I would have personally had your head. But, in light of their usefulnessâ€|we'reâ€|willing to look the other way."

'So, you don't condone my methods, but you find use for them in light of our predicaments? Such deplorable hypocrisy Valern,' Sparatus thought in complete disgust. However, he held his tongue. His HUNTERS were safe, for now at least.

"Councilors," their Omni-tools spoke collectively. It was a Salarian, judging from the accent. "The envoy for the United Races Space Command is here. Shall I grant them clearance?"

Tevos was the one to speak, assuming her "leadership" of the Council, as she once had, "Yes. Have C-Sec escort them to the Presidium."

"Private or Public, ma'am?"

Tevos looked at the others and they nodded seriously. "Our private chambers, if you please. This negotiation needs a special touch outside of the cameras." Of course, that was a lie. It was abundantly clear that good eighty percent of their conversations would discuss highly classified material and knowledge that the public was in no shape or form ready for.

"Understood, ma'am. They'll be there shortly." The feed cut off.

"Let's go," Tevos practically ordered to the annoyance of her colleagues. Nonetheless, Valern and Sparatus quietly followed the asari to the elevator taking them to their private chambers.

* * *

><p>Although his face was impassive, Ambassador Abu was troubled inwardly. As a dozen or so C-Sec officers lead their way to, presumably, the Citadel Council, he couldn't help but feel unnerved, as they lead him through the entire Citadel in full view of the public. He tried not to let the whispers, the clutching of personal belongings, gazes of outright fear startle him, but ultimately speaking, the reaction of the public wasâ€|mixed, and that was if you were being generous. Most Turians and some Salarians were at best curious. Asari, however, were unnerved at the two human marines, likely because of their similar facial structures, outside of the skin tone. Daxa, a Calean Royal Special Task Force Member, was nine feet even in height, was taller than virtually every Krogan in the galaxy, and his imposing stature had more than once caused some civilians to move as quickly out of the way of the URSC species.

As the seconds ticked by, Abu was nearly on the verge of panicking, as the whispers seem to grow louder, by the minute. From the balcony above, a Turian sneered. From behind him, judging from her body language, the asari C-Sec officer was keeping their distance to a minimum. To his right, another asari was impassive, yet curious, throwing a glance his way, every once in awhile. The ambassador clutched his chest, as the voices seemingly grew

louderâ€|louderâ€|.louder. He was losing himself. Did they make the right choice? Could he really do this? Had Xavier made a mistake? Perhaps, Fleet Admiral Ashdown was correct that he was too young and tooâ€"

The Ambassador had built up so many walls and mental blocks to cope with all the pent up stress, remorse, and vices, in his decade-and-a-half service to the URSC. Now, when it was finally time for his hard work to be put to of use, the lukewarm reception had shattered that last fortress and an invasion of every traumatic memory seem to storm the castle grounds of his mind and consciousness. The drell started to sweat profusely and his eyes widened as his species' eidetic memory kicked in.

"She tells me I'm good enoughâ€|.I question itâ€|why do I have to do this? I'm nothing specialâ€|I scroll through the list of namesâ€|.Dorian Sejanusâ€|something sticks outâ€|he's the right Captainâ€"" Abu's rambling was cut short, when the Field Master grabbed his shoulder suddenly, snapping him out of his trance.

"Whatâ€|?" Abu breathed out as he took a look around. The escort had stopped, temporarily. Judging from the bizarre looks that were thrown his way, it was clear the Citadel races were ignorant of drell physiology and the involuntary flashbacks.

"My liegeâ€|are you all right?" the Sangheili officer asked in concern.

"Iâ€|" he took another deep breath. "Yes. I am. Orâ€|I will beâ€|"

"If we need to postponeâ€""

"No," Abu rebuked sharply. "We've already come this far. Now is not the time." Another breath. "I can do this," he said, more to himself. "WE can do this. I'm not going to let a few flashbacks keep me from doing what I have to do."

"By your word, my liege," the Sangheili nodded. He turned his head back towards the C-Sec officers. "Shall we continue?" Although a bit perplexed at what they had just witnessed, the officers complied leading them once more.

'_Thank goodness that didn't happen during negotiations_', Shi thought in relief. That was a potential disaster in the making, as he could've accidentally revealed classified information, unwillingly. While he was thanking whatever diety above, they came to another elevator.

"The elevator will take you directly to the Council's private chambers. Only those negotiating with the Council may enter. All others must wait here," a Turian said flatly, with no room for argument. Abu's escorts were about to protest, but he held his hand up, silencing them.

"It's all right you eight," he told them with a smile. "I'll be fine." Although they were obviously reluctantâ€|they backed down. The doors opened and the drell stepped through and turned clockwise to face them once more. With a final nod of confidence, the doors closed

and he could feel the elevator lifting slowly.

"I miss the lifts from the Daedalus already," the drell snickered to himself. However, he cleared his throat, and all forms of jesting were over, replaced with a calm, cool, and collected negotiator that would do the United Races Space Command proud. He had several cards he could play at the table, and he would make sure he'd use every last one of them.

The lift stopped and the doors once again parted, revealing the Citadel Council's rather elaborate private chambers. As he was trained to do as a former member of the Office of Strategic Intelligence, Abu took in his surroundings in seconds. '_Hm the door is made out of titanium interesting three meters thick I'd say. Refractive glass windows bulletproof. I can barely hear my own footsteps either muting technology in the walls and floor? If things go south, I might not be able to contact the _Daedalus_ then. You have the upper hand Councilors for now._'

Of course, this process took less than a second as Abu put on a smile, genuine or deceptive, one couldn't tell. All the Councilors stood from their respective seats equidistant from each other at a desk that was roughly 2 meters in diameter with four seats, three on one side, and three on the other. Tevos, as she stood, returned the Ambassador's expression, but Abu saw through the smile easily. He could easily tell it was forced by the subtle twitching of her cheek muscles as she strained herself to put up a front. The drell had to stop himself from smirking. The asari and humans were remarkably alike in their facial structures, and he had spent years working with mankind and body language, especially involuntary ones, were exceptionally hard to fake, unless one spent years training for that sole purpose.

'_Forced smile already when she hasn't even met me?_' he thought carefully. He observed the other two who were impassive, but glanced her way, once with a slight narrowing of their eyes. '_Hm I see. So it seems they had a disagreement not too long ago. There's some tension here.' _Already his mind was going through various scenarios and tactics on how to exploit this new development. He settled on a K.I.S.S (keep it simple, stupid) method as taught by OSI: divide and conquer.

But first things first

"Greetings Councilors," Abu stated with confidence as he strolled his way towards the Triumvirate. "It is a pleasure. My name is Ambassador Shi Curasis Abu, and I greet you in the name of the United Races Space Command, and subsequently the Unified Species Government."

"I greet you in the name of the Citadel Council, Ambassador," Tevos replied, slowly going into diplomatic mode, which Abu took note of mentally. He'd have to be careful. "My name is Councilor Tevos. I represent the Asari Republics."

"I am Councilor Valern, I represent the Salarian Union."

"And I am Councilor Sparatus, I lead the Turian Hierarchy," Sparatus said tersely. Abu narrowed his eyes ever so slightly. Tevos and Valern were very professional in their motions, rigid, almost rehearsed. Truthfully, the Turian did too until that pause and his

choice of words. He said "lead" rather than "represent". Abu knew instantly how to take advantage of their discord. All four beings took their seats.

"Before we begin, Ambassador, I must say I'm surprised," Tevos admitted.

Abu raised an eyebrow genuinely curious as to what she had to say. "Surprised? In what way, Councilor?"

"I had expected yourâ€¦URSC was it?" Abu nodded, and she continued, "to send a human to represent their interests, rather thanâ€¦" she trailed off, forgetting what species the Ambassador was.

"I am what's known as a drell, Councilor. My species has been integrated with humanity for nearly seventy-five years. We were uplifted by the URSC who interfered when we were killing ourselves on our homeworldâ€¦" in the drell's peripheral vision, he noticed Councilor Valern twitch nervously. '_Does he know somethingâ€¦'? Ah, well, for a later date.' _

"Uplifted you say? Surely a lot of you resisted," Tevos replied, for once genuinely interested. Negotiations were also a chance to learn from one another, not just lay terms out on the table.

"We did," Abu confirmed. "However, soon enough, we saw no hope for our future alone. So when mankindâ€¦that's another word for humanityâ€¦asked us to join them, a lot of us did so without hesitation on one condition."

"A condition?" Sparatus repeated.

"Yes. Our leaders at the time, as well as a good many of us, believe it or not, had come to despise the very rock we evolved on. We didn't have the same attachment to the planet as humanity did their homeworld, Earth. It was quite the opposite, in fact. So in exchange for joining, we asked the humans, once we secured every male, female, and child from the planet that all navigational data to Rakhana to be purged from all records and no URSC ship would ever return there. We would leave it to die, long to be forgotten."

'_Interesting. I had always wondered why the humans had never returned to Rakhana after we found the system and built our dreadnought fleet,' Valern thought contemplatively.

"And they did so? How could you have known they did as you asked?" Sparatus blinked in confusion.

"It's quite simple, Councilor, at the time, humanity was young and it needed all the allies she could get. It was a very small price to pay, and should it have ever come out that humanity had liedâ€¦wellâ€¦let's just say it wouldn't have ended well. In any case, we drell had picked up a lot of humanities mannerisms, culture, and use of idioms. There are still traditions among us that are unique to our species, but on the whole, especially for our newer generation, the only difference between humanity and drell nowadays are simple skin tone and the fact that we cannot procreate. So even though I'm a drell and here negotiating with you three, there's really not much difference if a human had done it instead."

All three of the Councilors nodded, appreciatively. Abu could tell that they were genuine in their interest of his story.

"An interesting piece of history, Ambassador. A shame, really. If only the Council were as fortunate to have an uplifting go as well as the humans," Sparatus said, crafting a subtle jab at the Salarians, which didn't go unnoticed by all parties.

"Is that so?" Abu replied darkly. "You mean the Krogan?"

"Yes, desperate times came for desperate measures," Valern defended. "The Krogan had managed to drive the Rachni all the way into their nests. However, in their victory, we had been given another problem: their exceptional birth rate." Valern gave a defeated sigh. "Surely you can understandâ€"

"Councilor, neither me nor my government make no judgment on the Krogan or the genophage. As far as we're concerned you did what was necessary without killing off the entire species. We see the galaxy, as it is, not how we wish it to be. The Krogan brought their predicament on themselves. You're willing to let them go extinctâ€|so as far we're concerned, it's not the URSC's problem, either."

Tevos recoiled in shock, visibly, and her calm façade slipping for a split moment. "Extinction? Ambassador you have it all wrongâ€"

"Don't play coy with me, Councilor," Abu cut in sharply. "In the URSC we have a saying: Let's keep it real. If the Council wasn't content with letting the Krogan bleed a slow death, you would've offered an olive branch to cure genophage, or at least modify it so their birthrates wouldn't be as nearly problematic during the Rebellions. You've done nothing to placate the situation, and I suspect until we arrived, you would've continued to do so, complacent on your seat of power."

Tevos had pursed her lips, forcing herself to calm down in light of Ambassador Abu's jabs. Shi was impassive, but inwardly smirking. He was getting under her skin with "real" talk, rather than dancing around issues. Clearly, the asari wasn't prepared for such bluntness. Fortunately for her, Valern had answered the drell before she could make the critical blunder of losing her cool.

"I must admitâ€|you are correct," Valern conceded, to the shock of his asari colleagues.

'_Why would you admit that Valern?!_' Tevos thought clenching her fists under the table in rage.

Abu had to smirk, ever so slightly, knowing _exactly_ why the Salarian had conceded to his point. '_This Salarian is rather clever. He had one of two options: Option A was to concede to my point, giving me the upper hand later, or Option B) Say nothing, but potentially let Councilor Tevos make a mistake of letting her emotions get the best of her. Judging by her body language, it's a good chance she would have. Damnâ€|I could've ended this before it even started. Well played, Councilor. Well played.' _

"Why thank you, Councilor," he tipped his head in genuine respect for his well timed move. "I'd say that's enough a history lesson, right?"

Let's say we get down to business."

"Yes, lets," Sparatus said, interlocking his talons. "It is our understanding that the Batarians have been silent for months and their colonists are being forcefully moved back to their homeworld. It is the position of this council that you cease these actions andâ€"

"Stop," Abu interjected, to the shock of "opponents."

"Excuse me?" Sparatus spoke incredulously, shell-shocked at the breach in diplomatic protocol. That was one card that Abu was going to play. He knew the standards of diplomacy here as well back in the USG territory. He could choose to obey those rulesâ€|orâ€|break them as he saw fit, catching them off guard, giving him a chance to strike like a coiled viper in the grass.

"Councilor, the Batarian Hegemony is now under our jurisdiction. In fact, the Hegemony doesn't even exist anymore and it never will again. They started a war by attacking us. We finished it on our terms. Not theirs, and certainly not yours."

"Yes, we realize that Ambassador," Valern offered his input. "However, Council Law prohibits occupations of this magnitude without probable cause. What you're doing is a breach of several of our laws."

"Let's get one thing straight and let me make it as clear as day so it sinks in: you three have no leverage whatsoever_. We will not join this Council, we will not join this Citadel, and we will remain entirely separate from your jurisdiction. We will handle our own affairs away from your influence and meddling. The Batarians attacked us unprovoked, and we will do what we wish, within reason, with their remaining citizens. The Batarians are not being enslaved. They are beingâ€|reeducated. They will never be independent again. They sealed their fates once they attacked Zestiria. Once they've been 'reeducated', they will become OUR citizens and return to galactic civilization. Until then, we will keep them confined and isolated until we deem them ready and not a year sooner."

'Come on, take the bait!_' Abu thought, edgily. He was eager to play his trump card.

"They are a sovereign species Ambassador!" Sparatus countered forcefully, almost standing. "You have no right to forcefully move colonists who likely had nothing to do with the conflict. As despicable as I found the Batarian Hegemony, the Council still recognized there right for independence!" he said forcefully, hoping the drell would see reason.

Tevos' eyes widened. '_Goddess! Sparatus, you fool!_'

"Is that so?" Abu inquired, inwardly smirking. The Turian had taken his bait. "I find that highly ironic, considering the amount of client states the Turian Hierarchy has. Or is Council policy simply overlook the actions of the Turians when it suits the need of you three at the detriment of the others?"

'_Yes_', Tevos replied plainly, shocking everyone present, and catching Abu off completely off guard.

"Excuse me?" Abu retorted, wanting to make sure he had heard correctly.

"Why do you seem shocked, Ambassador? Is my honesty something you're not used to?" Tevos mockingly teased. "Or as your species calls it..."keeping it real", was it?" she said with that sinister innocence.

"Iâ€¦noâ€¦it's justâ€¦" Abu was stuttering, struggling to regain his composure. He was not expecting that at all, and thus had no immediate plans to counterattack. Tevos took advantage of this wholeheartedly.

"You may already know this Ambassador, but this Council does enjoy privileges that other members are not privy too. It's the natural order of things, unfortunately," she confessed, sipping on her drink, enjoying watching the drell squirm, even if he was trying to be subtle about it. "However, I'm sure you would already know this, hmm?"

Abu burrowed his brow. "What could you possibly mean?" There was an undercurrent of caution in his voice.

"Your species, Ambassador," Sparatus chimed in, seeing the opening Tevos had given him. "I'm sure your species has integrated rather well, but I'm sure the humans haveâ€¦privileges that even the other member species of your government do not have."

Abu inwardly cursed. They had him in a metaphorical corner. If he denied their observation, they would surely call him out on it, as he had already opened Pandora's Box with a brash and upfront negotiating style earlier, prompting them to break their own rules as well. Essentially, they had turned his earlier "victory" into something _they_ could exploit as well. He had already made it perfectly clear that they weren't joining the Citadel, so even if he had somehow leaked their indifference to the Associate races, they'd be dismissed on the grounds of it being politics and the principle of redundancy or, "telling them what they already knew". Outside of these chambers, there was no way to leverage such knowledge. He miscalculated

On the other hand, if he conceded to their point, then this would put him further behind on the "scoreboard", so to speak, and depending on their next words, potentially it could lead to a road where they would get the upper hand, forcing him to call a recess, a sign of weakness.

"What's your point Councilor?" he inquired, opting for a third option, a mix of both a concession and denial.

"You cannot talk hypocrisy of our government without recognizing your own. Nothing more, nothing less."

"I see," Abu replied, tersely, tapping his foot. He needed a new line of attack and he needed it now. '_What'd I'd give to talk to Matias rightâ€¦'" _He stopped his train of thought immediately as a realization came to him. Time to go for another opener. "Well, I concede you are right, Councilors," he acknowledged. "However, I do think we should set boundaries of our territories. Our A.I had offered input, but we ultimately went with our gutâ€¦" he

pausedâ€¦as if waiting for an outburst or reaction.

None came, to his bewilderment.

"Ambassadorâ€¦?" Tevos spoke up. "Are you finished?" There was that smile. That predatory smile had nothing but contempt from Ambassador Abu.

"Wellâ€¦no. I'm just surprisedâ€¦" he admitted.

"That we're not overtly emotional about your extensive use of Artificial Intelligence, I presume?"

"Right." Abu nodded in the affirmative. He thanked every deity above that he prepared for a contingency in case this happened, small chance as it was. However, he needed to see how this played out.

Sparatus took a deep breath. "We will admitâ€¦months ago we _were_â€¦concerned about your species use of Artificial Intelligence, citing the Geth as a primary means of our caution. However, we've realized that your AI has been alongside you over a century with practically zero negative side effects. So, in light of the overwhelming evidence of its benefits to your society, we have no choice but to logically conclude that the Quarians did something _wrong_, while the United Races Space Command did something _right_. It is the official position of this Council that we, _personally_, have no issues with the Unified Species Government's use of Artificial Intelligence," the Turian councilor spoke officially, as if laying down a decree.

"Personally?" Abu noted the emphasized word.

"This _Council_ has no issue with _your_ use of AI, however, they are still very much illegal in our territory and will remain so indefinitely," Valern explained. "We may be reasonable, Ambassador Abu, however, the public's reception towards your species is already lukewarm enough. Adding AI to the mix is a recipe for disaster. I'm sure you're quite aware of how ignorant the public can be."

"More than you could ever know."

"So, here's our terms: you may use your AI however you see fit, however in our territory, they must be left aboard your ships or if they _must_ be outside of their ships, their existenceâ€¦kept discreet, as well as our compliance with them to keep up our images. We aren't fools, you're _going_ to bring them here either way, so let's keep their activities at bare minimum," Tevos offered. "Any hacking or intrusion into our military computer systems will be considered an act of war. "

"Our civilians have Artificial Intelligences as well, dumb ones, but they do have them."

The Council was quiet at the revelation, thinking of a possible compromise. "Ah!" Valern perked up. "Simple: ban civilians who travel to our territory from bringing any AIs with them. They'll know its illegal, so we'll deal with the civilians on an individual basis. However, any military personnelâ€¦I'm sorry, but we'll have no choice but to assume that it's an act sanctioned by the Unified Species

Government."

"I understand," Abu nodded, appreciatively. He knew when he relayed this back to the Security Council, legislation regulating AI use by civilians would be drafted almost _immediately_.

"Are these terms acceptable?" the asari pondered, tilting her head.

"Yes, they are. The URSC accepts your position on Artificial Intelligence use by citizens of the Unified Species Government."

"Then it's settled, then."

"Well, then, I thank you, Councilors, for seeing reason and not thinking all AI are like the geth. If you'd like I could let you meet one once we conclude our negotiations," he offered.

"I'm afraid I'll have to decline your generous offer, Ambassador," Tevos replied with regret.

"Ah, well," Abu shrugged. "Shall we continue?"

Minutes had turned to hours, and hours had turned into days as the Citadel Council and Ambassador Abu had exchanged blows, negotiating to get the upper hand, each one not willing to back down. Everything had been put on the table, from trade, an embassy, exchange of technology, military war games, carving out territory, work visas for both governments, among a plethora of other miscellaneous topics of concern. It was nearing day six, and Ambassador Abu had finally grown tired and simply decide to play his trump card outright.

"So, Councilorsâ€¦when are we going to address the elephant in the room?" he crossed his arms, staring each of them down.

"I'm afraid I don't follow," Tevos retorted in confusion.

"Ah, right. Idiom," Abu chastised himself. "All right, let me be blunt and say it outright." He turned to Sparatus. "Tell me Councilorâ€¦why on earth were your soldiers on Khar'shan?"

There was silence, as the three Citadel aliens were inwardly panicking. This was everything they had feared and then some!

"I'm afraid I don't know what you're talking about, Ambassador. Any soldier of the Hierarchy was there of their own free will," Councilor Sparatus, denied, hoping to try plausible deniability.

"Oh? Is that so? So what's this then?" The question was rhetorical, obviously, and Abu pulled out a small device and pressed a button on the side, and audio had played.

"_I'm sure you're angry about your comrades. Believe me, I had no choice. I was simply following orders. It was nothing personal."

—

'_Noâ€¦tell me they weren't so careless!' _Sparatus was inwardly seething. The audio continued to play despite his rage.

"_Then why are you here?" _

"_To observe you. All potential threats to the Council must be taken seriously." _

"_We are only here because the Batarrians attacked one of our allies. We pose no threat to your Council." _

"_That may be true. It's a shame. I would've enjoyed sparring you indefinitely in these times of peace. Butâ€¦I was taught from birth to follow orders as deemed by my superiors. I must defeat you at all cost, for it is my duty to do so." _

"_You can try." _

The audio playback ended right there.

"Well, there you have it, Councilor. Straight from the soldier himself, incriminating you and your colleagues."

"We had no knowledge of this," Tevos instantly denied. She then narrowed her eyes. "And even stillâ€¦tread carefully Ambassador. Your exposure of this could expose your own program," she warned dangerously, believing the HUNTERS and OMEGA were cut from the same cloth.

Abu smirked outright. "You know you'd have a point except one detail you three aren't aware of: the OMEGAs are already public knowledge. They're already called the "Guardians of the USG", for the role they played in pushing the Batarrians off of Zestiria and the invasion of Khar'shan. I told you before. You have no leverage. Quite frankly, it doesn't matter if you did or didn't have knowledge of the existence of the Turian's super soldiers beforeâ€¦you clearly do now. So, you can force him to shut the program down, per your own laws, but that would provoke a war would it not? The Council that was standing for millennia suddenly ripped apart by civil war. Or, you can do nothing, which I suspect you will, let their program stay, because you know that our soldiers outclass yours by orders of magnitude, and the Turians are your only hope should the unthinkable happen. Soâ€¦Councilorsâ€¦which is it going to be?"

Tevos pursed lips and was inwardly cursing her fellow Councilor for the humiliation she took extremely personally. '_Damn you, Sparatus! You and General Oraka will pay for this! Even if I have to wait decades!' she thought vindictively._

Sparatus sighed in defeat. "What do you want?"

"A few things, the name of your program, and 10 billion credits," Abu demanded, simply.

"Iâ€¦" Sparatus blinked. That was it? 10 billion credits was practically chump change. "Those terms areâ€¦extremely reasonable."

"As much as I could demand more, I'm not a cruel or greedy person, Councilors. Truth be told, I was hoping to have both a professional and personal relationship with all three of you, ideally," He confessed, to their bewilderment. '_Besidesâ€¦I already have you three where I want, if Tevos is any indication. Now we just have to

play the long game and see you fall apart.' _

"Making an outrageous demand would cause a toxic relationship between our two governments. So that's my offer. You tell us the name of the program, add 10 billion credits to our treasury, and we will keep your secret indefinitely, unless you say otherwise. If you decide to go public, then we will instruct our Public Relations liaisons to say a few kind words in support."

"Those terms are acceptable," Sparatus breathed out in relief. He was honestly expecting to have to relinquish control of several systems ripe for colonization and pay reprimands fifty times the offered price. "We call our soldiers, HUNTERS," he answered, truthfully.

"HUNTER." Abu let the name roll off the tongue. The Turians didn't get points for originality, but at least they now knew what to call them instead of just generic "Turian Super Soldier."

"Is there anything else you wish to add, Ambassador?" Valern asked cautiously.

Abu shook his head. "No, Councilor, we've laid out our terms over the past week, and I've found them acceptable. Should things go well, we can begin trade in a month's time. My government needs an occasion to draft legislation for trade agreements and regulation of alien work visas."

"A month? That's remarkably fast," Valern admitted, highly impressed. The Council usually needed half-a-year, for most major edicts if you were being optimistic.

"Our government was explicitly designed from the very day it was created a century ago to make political gridlock almost impossible and to correct inefficiency wherever it's found. It also helps that nearly every politician in the USG has their own AI assistant," Abu chuckled.

"Yes, I can see how an AI could assist," Valern nodded, as the implications of such efficiency started to give him his own ideas. '_Perhaps one day the Citadel can do the same? Hmm' there's a lot we can learn from these people.' _

"Do you three have anything else to add?" Ambassador Abu asked, politely.

"Yes," Tevos nodded. "While I understand your government will take considerably less time than ours will not. Could the Council have the honor of having a look at the drafts and add our own input?"

"Hmm" Abu put scratched his chin as he thought about it. "I don't see why, not. However, the drafts you request to add input on must have direct correlation to you. Any request for input on bylaws in our own borders will be denied or ignored. Am I to presume we will have a hand in your rulings as well?"

The triumvirate nodded, collectively.

"Very well, Councilors. I accept." He stood and bowed. "On behalf of

the Unified Species Government and its scientific, military, and exploratory arm the United Races Space Command, I Shi Curasis Abu fully accept all terms and agreements laid out in this treaty."

With a stroke of an electronic pen, Abu had signed off, formally establishing diplomatic relationship with the Citadel.

(Timeline)

_June 17__th__, 2168: The URSC formally establishes diplomatic relations with the Citadel. The Citadel agrees to open an Embassy on Arcturus and the URSC plans to do the same. This marks the first time a separate, independent galactic power forms an embassy without being subject to Citadel law. Public reaction is mixed, however, the citizens of the USG are ecstatic in contrast._

_June 21__st__, 2168: Rumors of rebel movement continue to surface in URSC space. OSI is tasked to investigate. _

_June 25__th__, 2168: The occupation of Khar'shan is going relatively well, with most citizens seemingly accepting their fate. Rather than be complacent, Director Xavier tasks hundreds of N7 to investigate.

_

_June 26__th__: Parliament drafts legislation for trade agreement with the Citadel _

_June 28__th__, 2168: The Turian Hierarchy pays 10 billion credits in reparations for the HUNTER assault on Khar'shan. The money is sent to grieving families of the Sangheili Empire, as well as to finance parts of the SIGMA initiative._

_July 1__st__, 2168: The _Long Night of Solace_ is covertly transferred to ARCHON, where it will spend the next decade being rebuilt by URSC engineers._

_July 10__th__: The URSC _Daedalus_ is officially commissioned for the public on Axiom Prime. The URSC Olympus is still on track to be commissioned by 2183. _

_July 12__th__, __2168: Parliament officially stops procurement of the F/A-50 Rapier fighter. The fighter will be phased out within a five year period._

_July 15__th__, 2168: The F-52 Cutlass begins mass production on Axiom Prime. _

_July 18__th__, 2168: The A.R.C Championship begins with a series of practice races. As a token of cultural exchange, the USG allows the Citadel races to attend the race, escorted by civilian USG ships.

_

****Eden Prime****

****Constant, Outer Suburbs****

****July 21****st****, 2168****

Alyxandria Shepard stood, barely, in a stance panting hard as a drell

with blue skin stood away from her about ten feet away. The fourteen year old had a bokken, a Japanese wooden sword, in her hand, using it to prop her up. She was sweating profusely, and her tank top was drenched enough to where some might mistake she took a dip in the family pool.

"Let'sâ€¦goâ€¦againâ€¦" she panted out, unwilling to back down, despite her exhaustion.

"Again? Alyx, you can barely stand, we should call it quits," the drell replied sternly.

Alyx shook her head defiantly. "No way, Kolyat!" she replied, sternly, grabbing her bokken and getting back into another stance, standard for N7 assassins.

Kolyat sighed and obliged the young teenager. Kolyat was the son of the late Thane Krios. His father had died during the invasion of Khar'shan and although his grief wasn't anywhere near as rough during the early days, it was still a sore subject for the drell. His uncle, Tarius, and his uncle-in-all-but-name Tyson, were forbidden unfortunately from disclosing the details of their father's death under penalty of high treason. Kolyat understood. His father was an N7: the best assassins and spies in the URSC. Whenever Thane could come home, he would always spend time with his son, teaching him survival techniques, discipline, martial arts, hand-to-hand combat and swordsmanship.

To honor his father's memory and his mantra of "everyone can be a teacher and a student. Sometimes the line between either is blurred," he took up Alyx as his pseudo protégé, teaching her what his father had taught him. Her skill and knack for martial arts was borderline prodigious, but he had over ten years of experience over her and as suchâ€¦

Alyx had parried a sword swing, but momentarily forgotten: this wasn't a bokken only spar. Kolyat had easily dodged her swing, pivoted on his left foot, and backhanded her in the face. Momentarily stunned, Kolyat followed up with a Shaolin Dragon's Tail kick to her ankles, sweeping her off her feet. She landed unceremoniously, and Kolyat pinned her to the mat with his bokken to her throat.

"You lose, Alyx," he grinned. She pouted, but nonetheless accepted her defeat. Clapping was heard as Kolyat helped the younger Shepard to her feet.

"Got to hand it to you nephew. With the way you fight, you should pass basic easily," Tarius smirked, giving his nephew his props. If drell could blush, Kolyat would've been as red as a tomato.

"It's nothing, Uncle," he replied modestly. "She's my pupil, I'll be facing men my own age."

Alyx scoffed. "Geeâ€¦thanks for the vote of confidence, 'sensei'," she stuck her tongue out playfully.

Kolyat gently slapped her upside the head. "You know what I meant," he allayed.

"Oww, what was that for?"

"For sassing me," Kolyat smirked.

"No fair! Only mom and dad can do that!" she argued.

"Speaking of which," Tarius interrupted, cutting short the banter between master and student. "You might want to check outside."

Alyx's eyes widened in surprise. "Oh my gosh, they're here?!" she immediately took off from the spying room and hopped over several obstacles in her way, dashing outside, leaving her extended alien family bemused.

"Parkour, huh? What has Uncle Tyson been teaching her?" Kolyat inquired, impressed by her brief display of free running.

"I think the better question is what _hasn't_ he taught her," Tarius grinned, as the two stepped outside near the pool. The Shepards and Krios' lived in an upper middle-class suburb on the outskirts of Constant. True to his word, General Dragovich had gotten Tyson and Tarius their maximum allotted benefits for retirement, along with a settlement of nearly _three million_ credits each, for the ordeal with the HUNTERS. Using their newfound wealth, both veteran Titan Drop Shock Troopers moved to Eden Prime and both put a down payment on two houses in an affluent neighborhood. Free from the strict fraternization regs, Tyson and Hannah reconnected, and were married in a private ceremony with both Tarius and Alyx as witnesses.

"Girl's a damn sponge, uncle. She's got a lot of potential. Pretty soon, she'll start running circles around me," Kolyat half joked.

"Maybe, but then again, she is Tyson's daughterâ€|" he muttered, incoherently.

"What was that?"

"Not-nothing, nothing at all," Tarius said a little too quickly. He quickly changed the subject. "Soâ€|basic trainingâ€|you think you're ready?"

Kolyat nodded. "I've been waiting to join the Marines ever since my father died, uncle. I'm going to honor his memory and become an N7 to make him proud."

Tarius smiled weakly. "Wellâ€|you're eighteen now, and an adult. I'd be lying if I said I didn't want you potentially going into combat, butâ€|considering I've been dropping on rebel strongholds, invaded planets, cleared stations and been Tyson's badass sidekick for the past twenty years, I'd be a hypocrite," he grinned.

"Such humility," Kolyat teased while shaking his head.

"Hey, I can't help it. If I'm good, I'm good." He grabbed out two beers from a nearby cooler. "But, seriously, Kolyat. I'm proud of you. No matter what happens, you hear? I'm glad you could spend time with us before you ship off."

Kolyat graciously took the beer and popped the lid with a precise strike of his palm.

"Thank you, Uncle Tarius. Cheers," he said gulping down the alcoholic beverage, savoring its taste.

"Who knows, you might find you a nice boyfriend or potential husband," Tarius joked, causing his nephew to choke on his drink in embarrassment.

"UNCLE!"

While, uncle and nephew were catching up, Alyx was rushing outside where she saw a familiar black sports car that belonged to her father. She saw a figure with blue and black Navy fatigues and a single silver star on either collar, and practically squealed.

"MOM!" she squealed out in bliss, tackling Hannah in a hug. "Oh, my god you're here! You made it!"

Hannah chuckled and returned her daughter's embrace. "Someone's excited to see me," she mused, kissing her forehead.

"I've missed you. You've been gone ever since the war ended," she frowned, burying her head in her mother's chest.

"Yeah, I know. I missed my angel too," she replied sincerely. Unlike a good majority of the URSC invasion force, Hannah was obligated to stay on Khar'shan until all of the citizens from the Batarians colonies could be secured on the planet and Hegemony transferred completely to an occupied Military rule. For a few weeks, she served directly under Admiral Steven Hackett, who was appointed military governor of the entire planet and Commander-in-Chief of the Occupation Defense Force, ODF.

"What, I don't get any love?" Tyson joked coming around the car with several of his wife's bags.

"Dad, I saw you yesterday," she joked, sticking her tongue out. Tyson just shook his head and made his way inside.

"You smell. Young lady, you need to take a shower right now," her mother ordered her sternly, hands on her hip.

Alyx groaned, but nodded. "Yes, ma'am," she complied, in a defeated tone. She ran back into the house and rushed upstairs while her mother got settled in and her father set up the grill for a cookout.

Hannah had to smile, watching her daughter retreat into their house. She was home. She had her husband and now her daughter. Everything, as far as she was concerned, was perfect.

****Eden Prime****

****Soaring Heights Speedway****

****July 22****nd****. 2168****

"_Welcome Racing fans to the Soaring Heights Speedway to the A.R.C pro jet racing circuit counts down to the first race of the 2168 A.R.C Championship! I'm your host Gabriel Horn and my lovely cohost, Juha Asek! Take it away Juha." _

"_Thank you Gabriel! We're primed for an exciting championship this year, as the A.R.C expects upwards up to 70 billion viewers from all over the galaxy. For the first time in A.R.C history we have invited several alien species from the Citadel to watch the USGs most popular sport!" _

"_That's right, Juha, this race is going to be for the record books as we got fan favorites Johnny Miller, Trey Jordan, Maggie Strong, Zak Kim, and Galen Antares" _

Alyx had tuned out the broadcast as she and the rest of her family finally arrived at Soaring Heights via a civilian VTOL shuttle, which carried them all the way from Constant. It was a two-hour long flight, yet to the teen it felt like an eternity.

"Alyx, calm down, girl," Kolyat chuckled, as he saw the youngest Shepard squirm with excitement.

"I can't help it! I finally get to see a live race! Maybe I'll get an autograph? No, too cliché. A ride in an ARC jet?" her eyes seem to light up at the idea. "Oh, god! YES! That would be so awesome!"

"Whoa, whoa, baby girl, slow down," Tyson laughed heartily, pulling her into a hug, to keep her from running around the shuttle while it landed. She may have been fourteen, but she was still a kid at heart, which he treasured.

Rather than squirm her way out of her father's embrace, she buried her head into his neck affectionately.

"Can't"too".excited."

Hannah shook her head. "You know you can't stay like that with your father forever."

Alyx groaned. "Yeah, mom"but this is _now_, not forever, no?" she smirked.

Hannah playfully smacked her upside the head, laughing. "Don't be a smartass!"

"She did learn from the best," Tarius pointed out, scrolling through a newsfeed on his tablet, nonchalantly.

"Tarius!" Hannah scoffed. "Don't encourage her!"

"_Now approaching District One, Alpha Station," _came a female voice over the intercom. "_All Passengers are reminded the A.R.C is not responsible for any lost or stolen items. Please make sure all belongings are in your possession and please exit to your right. Please enjoy your stay at Soaring Heights Speedway and we once again welcome you to the site of the A.R.C Championship!" _

"YES! Finally!" Alyx jumped out of her father's lap. "Dad, can me and Kolyat go exploring for a bit? We'll meet you at the hotel later on

today. Please?" she practically begged.

Tyson chuckled, and pretended to mull it over, for the sole purpose of keeping his daughter in suspense. "Hmmâ€¦"

"Well?!"

With an amused laugh he stood up and hugged her. "Yeah, you can go. Just don't stay out too late, okay?"

"Yes! Oh, my god, thank you, thank you, thank you," she thanked, still trembling with excitement.

"If we call you, I expect you to answer within three ring tones, got it, young lady?" Hannah warned sternly.

Alyx had gulped, before nodding dumbly. "Yes, ma'am!" Hannah smiled, and then kissed her daughter's forehead. "Then go on. I won't stop you. We'll be at the hotel getting settled in."

"Take care of her, will you, Kolyat?" Tyson asked.

"Don't worry, sir. I'll make sure she'll stay out of trouble, I promise."

Nearly crying tears of joy, she hugged both of her parents simultaneously, crying out a, "Thank you," Grabbing her backpack, which was black, with one strap, she grabbed Kolyat's arm and lead them off.

"Our baby girl's growing up," Hannah smiled, as she watched the two vanish amongst the crowd of thousands.

Alyx lead Kolyat through the crowds of people and took in the entire sight. Soaring Heights was awe-inspiring. Situated on a high valley, Soaring Heights was an enormous mega structure rivaling even the Zestirians. The stadium was enormous with a 2.5 million-seat capacity that was sold out year after year. Surrounding the Heights were a dozen towns and cities with plenty to do: water parks, amusement park rides, arcades, simulations, war games, laser tag, water sports, beaches among others. The tourist revenue alone from the annual _8.5 billion_ visitors who came from both Eden Prime and all of the colonies in the USG accounted for a whopping 5% of the _entire planet's_ GDP!

"This isâ€¦amazing..â€¦" Alyx said in awe as she took it all in. Ever since she was nine years old she dreamed of one day going to a live ARC race, but to be here at the Championship tournament?! All kinds of emotions were swelling up within her, so much so, that she didn't watch where she was going and bumped into someone, hard enough to fall flat on her buttocks.

"Oww, sorry, I wasn't looking," Alyx apologized immediately, before looking up and froze. Standing above her was a tall, muscular, dark-skinned, male, who was about her age. He was wearing khaki cargo pants, tennis shoes, and a black shirt with the "S" symbol for Superman, along with a matching snapback turned backwards.

'_Iâ€¦wowâ€¦'_ _Alyx thought a blush threatening to creep its way to

her face.

"Watch where you're going!" the teen had cried out, annoyed. However, being a gentlemen, he still helped Alyx to her feet.

Alyx rolled her eyes. "Well, excuse me, _princess_. I _said_ I was sorry. If that's not enough you can kiss my ass," she shot back, feeling bold, seeing as how this stranger was her age, not an adult. He may have been handsome, but he didn't make a good first impressionâ€|

The teen blinked, before laughing. "Oh, wow. You got spunk. You actually stood up to me."

Alyx raised a brow and crossed her arms amused. "Is that your go to line for every girl you bump into?" she tilted her head, inquisitively.

"Only the cute ones," he replied, smirking. Now a full blush had adorned her cheeks.

'_Oh, god, Alyx, stay calm, stay calm. He's only the first boy to complement your looks _ever_â€|say something, say something! Likeâ€|'

—

"Soâ€|I see you like Superman," she blurted out, before mentally smacking herself. '_Oh, great, opening line their Shepard.'_

The teen had perked up, considerably. "Oh, hell yeah! He's like my all time favorite Superhero! He's been around for over 230 years and still going strong! I have all of his recent comics."

"Oh, is that so? I'm more of a Wonder Woman fan, myself," Alyx confessed with a blush.

He blinked. "Really, now? You keep up with comics?"

Alyx smiled, and scratched the back of her head, nervously. "Well, yeah, more so DC than everyone else. My mom was in the Navy and comic books were common on the shuttles when traveled. When you're bored, you find some way to past the time by, so, I started to read them and genuinely enthralled by the various storylines. I still try my best to read the latest ones on the extranet."

The male's smile began to grow wider the more Alyx told him. "My name is Shane," he introduced himself. "Shane HyÅ•sube," he clarified, adding his surname.

Alyx returned his smile. "Alxyandria Shepard, but my family and friends call me Alyx," she introduced herself.

"Oh, really? And what do I, being a stranger, get to call you?"

Shepard had smirked. "That depends on you, big guy."

Shane was already smitten, yet he didn't even realize it. "Oh, wow, okay, then I'll call you Alyx, then."

"Good call," she shot back, her smirk still on. However she was

curious about something. "Your last nameâ€|it's Japaneseâ€|yet you'reâ€|"

"Black, I know," Shane rolled his eyes. "I get thatâ€|a lot. However, if you're wondering why that isâ€|" he stroked his chin, much the same way her father did.

"You ever play wargames? I know a good simulation a few blocks from here, we can play twenty questions thereâ€|that is if it's okay with your chaperone."

"I would love toâ€|"Wait, chaperone? What are you talking about?"

He cocked his head to the side. "Mind your surroundings, Alyx," he tilted his head at three-o'clock, and Shepard saw Kolyat was sitting on a bench staring them both down with the biggest knowing grin on his face.

'_Oh, damn. He's good. Really good.' _

"Oh, I'm sure he won't mind," she assured her fellow teen. She glanced back at him. "Yeah, he definitely won't mind," she groaned, hoping Kolyat wouldn't embarrass her too much.

"So, how about it? First race isn't for another five hours and I got time to kill," Shane offered, as the two started to walk together towards their drell compatriot.

"Shaneâ€|that sounds absolutely wonderful."

Neither of the two realized just how important their fateful meeting would be and the ripple effects that would shake the foundations of the entire galaxy.

(END)

And that's a wrap! Been waiting to get to this arc for a long while now! It's all thrills from here on out!

By the way, in case you're wondering, Shane is ****MY**** OC, not a readers', so he's ****not**** going to Alyx's partner, but rather an extremely important one (I'm almost bold enough to call him a deuteragonist). There's still time for you to send profiles! Keep 'em coming!

At the time of this posting, I will be starting summer courses for college, and that will have my undivided attention, so I won't even TOUCH the next chapter for another month or later, so DO NOT send me constant Private Messages wondering where the next chapter is. It's coming. I have priorities first. Which is why I scrambled to write this chapter before Monday. So, yeah, if you want a release date window for sixteen, try late July, Early August. I'm trying to get two more chapters out before school starts again in August. I love you guys, but I'll love my degree even more.

I'll see you guys next time!

****Codex:****

****Soaring Heights: ****Soaring Heights is the name of the ARC racetrack

on Eden Prime. Alongside _Dragon's Fang_ on Axiom Prime and _Badlands National Park_ located Laos, Nigeria, Soaring Heights is easily one of the largest and most popular tourist destinations in the USG. Soaring Heights racing circuit covers an airspace the size of Germany, only surpassed by Dragon's Fang. Because of its popularity and events rotating with the seasons, Soaring Heights contributes an exceptional amount to Eden Prime's GDP, and subsequently the USG economy.

****Sangheili Ranks:** **Sangheili, being a separate entity of the USG, have their own ranking systems that have evolved from their Covenant days for a chain of command that is compatible with the URSC

(Sangheili Rank-USG Equivalent-Pay Grade)

Navy Ranks:

Deckmasterâ€"Ensignâ€"O-1

Sub-Ship Master-Lieutenant Junior Gradeâ€"O-2

Junior Ship Masterâ€"Lieutenantâ€"O-3

Mid-Ship Masterâ€"Lieutenant
Commanderâ€"O-4

Shipmasterâ€"Commanderâ€"O-5

Senior Shipmasterâ€"Captainâ€"O-6

Naval Masterâ€"Rear Admiral Lower Halfâ€"O-7

Armada Master-Rear Admiral Upper Half, O-8

Fleet Masterâ€"Vice Admiral, O-9

Senior Fleet Masterâ€"Admiral, O-10

Imperial Admiralâ€"Fleet Admiral, O-11

****Sangheili Ground Forces****

Sub Commander (Second Lieutenant)

Commander (First Lieutenant)

Junior Field Master (Captain)

Mid-Field Master (Major)

Field Master (Lieutenant Colonel)

Senior Field Master (Colonel)

Legion Master (Brigadier General)

Senior Legion Master (Major General)

Grand Legion Master (Lieutenant General)

War Master (General)

Grand War Master (General of the Army)

16. Sins of the Father

Mass Effect: The New Journey****

Chapter Sixteen: **_Sins of the Father_**

All right guys, I'm so, sorry for the long wait. I had some legal issues to take care of that prevented me from updating when I want and wellâ€¦yeah, let's just leave it at that. Good thing though is during that time I got a lot of ideas despite the distractions.

And I just have to ask, not many people gave feedback on the negotiations I did last chapter, aside from like two or three reviewers, which is disheartening, as it seems I'm getting less reviews each chapter. Ah, well.

I just want to say one thing about Halo 5: Guardians: What the **_fuck_** was that?

With that being said, let's go!

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* * *

><p>Eden Prime

Soaring Heights Speedway

****July 24****th****, 2168, 2300 hours ****

"Okay, okay, I'll give you that one, Alyx," Shane smirked, as he gave her a sly expression on her laptop's screen. Currently, Alyx was in her hotel room talking to the teen that had her complete and undivided attention. Shepard couldn't stop smiling, even if she wanted too, as she lay on her stomach across her bed, feet propped up. She was wearing simple nightwear: blue and yellow Wonder Woman shorts and a black tank top.

"Damn, right," she grinned. "All right how about this: Brainiac versus Ultron."

Shane scoffed at her. "Seriously? Ultron should get manhandled by Brainiac."

Alyx shook her head. "I wouldn't be so sure. I mean not even the Avengers have ever managed to kill Ultron completely. He always comes back."

"Well, when he comes back, Ultron will just get his ass kicked

again," Shane grinned. "Remind me when Ultron can kidnap entire cities."

"Well, there was that one movieâ€"

"Aside from that!"

Alyx giggled but then burrowed her brow. "Waitâ€|time out," she called out, putting her hands in a T-shape. "Didn't Brainiac need to shrink Kandor for that to happen?"

"Depends on what continuity you follow, but in general, no, not really," Shane shrugged.

"Huh, how about that," Alyx nodded appreciatively.

She saw Shane shift on his bed and the webcam went out of focus for a split second. "Okay, as much I love talking comics with you, I want to get to know you more, big guy," she said genuinely, subconsciously playing with her hair.

"What else do you want to know?" he cocked his head to the side. Shepard bit her lip at the gesture, struggling to keep her hormones under control.

"All right, I waited to ask this for a long timeâ€"

"Two days isn't long," he interjected.

"SHUSH!" she huffed, laughing. "Don't ruin it!"

"All right, all right," he chuckled. "Go ahead."

"Okay, you said your last name is HyÅ•sube, right? Yet, you're black, with a Japanese last name. Mind filling me in?"

Shane seemed to give her a sad smile. "Well, my biological mom died when I was an infant," he began to explain. "She and my biological dad were refugees from an outer colony, Eucadia, which almost fifteen years ago was plagued with rebels and terrorism. My mother barely made it to Earth alive. The shuttle she had managed to sneak aboard had stopped in Osaka, Japan. Despite their best efforts, my mother was far too sick. There was nothing they could doâ€|"

"Shaneâ€|" Alyx frowned, clearly not expecting such a tale. "I'm soâ€"

"Don't be," he shook his head. "I don't miss her. I literally never knew her. As cold as it may sound, I have no attachment to the woman outside of the fact that she gave birth to me. She played no part in raising me."

"I see," Alyx gulped, trying her best to understand where he was coming from. "Go on," she encouraged, eager to learn more.

There was a deep exhale, before he continued. "So, you see, during the wars with the rebels, dropships filled with eezo had a few accidents and my mother was pregnant with me at the timeâ€|"

Alyx's eyes widened. "Wait, you're a biotic?"

Shane's eyes narrowed as he asked the million-credit question. "Is that going to be a problem?" he coldly asked her.

She flinched; genuinely offended he would ask that. "What?! HELL, NO! Why would I care about that?"

Shane had grunted. "Alyx, even though it's not as bad as it was ten years ago thanks to the Zestirians, we biotics are still discriminated against outside of the military because people are ignorant. I just needed to make sureâ€|"

"Shane, look at me," she practically ordered, staring the teen down on her computer screen. The teenager actually turned away from her. "Shaneâ€|please," she pleaded, before he obliged. Shepard's cerulean blue eyes had locked with Shane's chocolate brown. "I know I've only known you for two days and I already feel a connection with you," she admitted. No use in denying it. To say she was attracted to the dark-skinned teenager was putting it mildly. "I will never, EVER, look down on you for who you are. Okay?" She gave him a cocky grin. "Besides, with your powers, you're like a mini Scarlet Witch," she stuck her tongue out, playfully.

"Oh, my god," Shane guffawed, loudly, caught off guard. "Okay, I needed that. Thanks." He smiled.

"No problem," she replied smiling back.

"Okayâ€|my turn I guess. How many siblings do you have?" Shane asked, already mentally guessing around six or more.

"Umâ€|" Alyx stammered out while blushing with embarrassment. "Iâ€|wellâ€|don't have any. I'm an only child."

Shane didn't even bother to hide his complete shock. He nearly fell off the bed. "Holy fucking shit. Are you serious?!" He blinked for good measure.

The young Shepard shook her head, not the least bit surprised by his reaction. The amount of the children who were only children made up only one-thousandth of one percent of the entire USG population. To say that Alyx was a rare breedâ€"quite literally, from a certain point-of-viewâ€"would be an understatement.

"Yup. Dead serious. I'm sure me only knowing my dad for about ten months probably has a lot to do with it." At Shane's raised eyebrow, she waved him off. "Later. It's a long story."

"I got time," he tried to assure her, but a voice on his screen in the background called to him in a foreign language. Alyx assumed it was Japanese. Shane sighed.

"Got to run. Even during summer vacation, kaa-chan is strict on going to bed at a decent hour. Dammit."

"My mom in the Navy. Trust me, I know how you feel." She shook her head. "So, same time tomorrow? I'll see you at the final race tomorrow right?"

"Wouldn't miss it for the world. Oh, and don't forget to add me on

****Tsunagi****! Good night, Alyx." Shane shut off his computer, leaving a blissful Shepard.

"Good night, Shane," she sighed dreamily, closing her eyes, grinning from ear-to-ear.

"Well, well, baby girl. I let you go for two days and you run off and get a boyfriend," Tyson joked, choosing this moment to strategically make his presence known.

Alyx yelped in surprise and unceremoniously fell off the bed in embarrassment. Despite her caramel colored skin—a product of her mixed-ethnic heritage—her face was completely red. "DAD! Oh, my god, you scared the shit out of me!" she yelled at him before realizing her folly. Her eyes widened. "I meant crap—|sorry—|" she frowned, her head down.

Tyson shook his head, amused, before helping his daughter up. "It's all right, princess. I don't care about you cursing," he told her gently. She looked up in surprise.

"You don't?"

He shook his head. "Nope." Then his gaze turned serious. "However, if you cursed _at _me, or your mother, then we'll have some issues, understand?"

"Yes, sir." She nodded obediently.

"Good. So, let's talk about this boy you've been talking to the past few—" Tyson didn't even get to finish before Alyx interrupted him.

"Dad, please don't! He's not a bad guy at all! We've been talking for a few days and I _really_ like him, he's fun, charismatic, smart, _gorgeous_ and—"

"Whoa, whoa, whoa, take it easy, baby girl, it's not what you think," he assured her, holding his hands out defensively.

Alyx blinked. "It's not?" She was on the verge of a panic attack, thinking her father was going to forbid her from seeing Shane again, a prospect that was utterly _terrifying_ in the teenager's view.

He shook his head and motioned for her to sit down on the bed. Pulling a chair from the hotel desk by the TV, he straddled it in front of her. "I just wanted to lay some ground rules. I'm not going to try to stop you from seeing him. He sounds like a good kid from what I've seen and you're a growing young lady with hormones just like all the other guys and gals your age. Understand?"

Alyx bobbed her head, hanging on her father's every word.

"Good. I'm not going to be an overprotective dad, where no man is good enough. Fuck that. I couldn't stand it when I was a kid, and I sure as hell can't stand it now. I love you and I want what's best for you, but I have to let you make your own choices and learn from your own mistakes. I'm a guide, not a path." Tyson smiled at her and cupped her neck, which Alyx leaned into as he scratched the back of her neck affectionately. Judging from his daughter's physical

reaction, she immensely enjoyed the gesture. "I know from experience me telling you no is just going to make you want to see him even more, not that I want to, so might as well make the most of it. I'll just say this: be careful, and use your best judgment."

Alyx frowned. "But what if I make a mistake?"

"You'll be punished accordingly," he replied flatly, making his daughter wince. "I'm still your parent, and as much as I enjoy our relaxed and affectionate relationship, I'm your father, not your friend. You step out of line, I will ream your ass. Do you understand me?" He honestly didn't expect he'd have to at all. But at the same time, he had to let her know she couldn't walk over him, even she was turning into a daddy's girl.

"Yes, sir," she replied respectfully. "What else, dad?"

Tyson was smirking inwardly, but kept his face as impassive as possible. He saw an opportunity he couldn't pass up. "Yes. When you and Shane eventually have sex, use a condom, please," he told her with a straight face.

As he suspected, his daughter was completely caught off guard and she was blushing furiously.

"DAD! OH MY FUCKING GOD! YOU DID NOT JUST SAY THAT!" she shrieked out, causing Tyson to near bust a gut laughing. "That's not funny!" she said playfully hitting him on the arm. "I'm not even close to being ready to doâ€|wellâ€|that!" In fact, she hadn't done soâ€|_ever_.

Her father was simply snickering. "You say that now, but I know you. It'll come eventually. Justâ€|don't tell your mother. You know how she'll be. So long as you two, or any other boy you meet and feel comfortable doing that, protect yourselves and it's consensual, I honestly don't care." Although most Sexually Transmitted Diseases such as HIV, herpes, etc. had been cured by the early 2060s, with most citizens getting mandatory vaccinations as infants, contraception was still promoted for young people who weren't ready to have children quite yet.

She had to stare at her father in amazement. "You aren't like most dads I know."

"What's the point of saying no to something you're likely going to do anyhow? Most parents make the mistake of trying control their children completely. I know how your mind works, soâ€|yeah."

"Thank you," Alyx told him, eternally grateful, and slipped into his arms, and was kissing his cheek, staring at him directly in his eyes. Tyson had to snicker. His daughter probably didn't realize it, but she craved physical affection like a drug. He scratched the back of her neck while she sat in his lap, sending more shivers down her spine.

"No problem. I just got one question."

She slipped out of the embrace and stared at him, quizzically, tilting her head. "What?"

"Who the _hell_ is Doctor Strange?"

Now it was Alyx's turn to laugh at her father's expense.

* * *

><p>Soaring Heights Speedway

July 25**th****, 2168**

**20,000 feet **

A.R.C Pilot Galen Antares revved up his engines in attempt to make another pass at the racer currently in the lead, Johnny Miller. A.R.C jets could go up to Mach 6 in atmosphere and were it not for his state-of-the-art flight suit and the inhibitors inside the jet, he would've passed out from G-locking.

What made Galen stand out from the rest of the pilots was his age: he was only fourteen, a bona-fide all around child prodigy. ARC regulations only said a potential professional racer had to be: of sound mind and moral character, able to pass a strict flight physical, height and weight requirements (which differed depending on the pilot's species and gender,) and, of course, skillful in the art of flying. Because it was automatically assumed that most who met those requirements would be legal adults 18+, it was never strictly in the rulebook. Galen's managers took advantage of said loophole. Despite initial protests and grumbling from the URSC Aviation Administration bureaucrats, Galen was a bona fide cash cow, bringing in tens of millions of revenue. Not quite to the extent of champion Johnny Miller or his fellow pilot and close friend, Trey Jordan, but his youth and skills definitely made him a standout and rising superstar in the pro leagues.

Galen stared out at the sky before him as he was crossing roughly two miles of sky every 4 seconds. Johnny Miller's red ARC jet was 1000 feet aheadâ€”practically right behind him in the aerospace worldâ€”and the finish line was 100 miles away. This race would be over in less than sixty seconds.

His blue eyes scanned his sensors. His competition was behind him, closing in fast. He couldn't allow that. "All right time to kick it up a notch," he muttered to himself. There was no choice. He didn't know if his body would be able to take the punishment, but there was no way of catching up to Johnny without it.

Flipping a glass panel with a blue button inside, he said before pressing it, "Activating Ion Booster!" The effect was instantaneous. Aviation technology had progressed exponentially over the past century. Aerospace engineering had gotten to the point where pilots who went supersonic _barely_ felt the effects of going faster than the speed of sound, akin to a commercial airline flight. However, the ion booster in Galen's ARC jet, temporarily propelled Galen at hypersonic speeds. His G-suit filled with air trying to keep his blood circulating through his small teenage frame.

Because of his decade-plus of racing experience, Johnny had already anticipated the hotshot prodigy's move, shaking his head. "You've got a lot to learn kid," he said to himself, activating his own boosters. Because of a strict diet and workout regiment, Johnny's six-foot

frame was easily able to take the high Gs. The two jets were neck-and-neck and the finish line became visible. The entirety of Soaring Heights' 2.5 million attendees was on the edge of their seats as Galen and Johnny fought for dominance, using maneuver after maneuver to gain the upper hand.

Galen was grunting hard, clenching his abdominals in an effort to stay conscious, while Johnny was as cool as a cucumber, completely in-control despite his jet going over Mach 5.

"Maybe next year, kid," Johnny spoke to Galen over his headset. Barely even a heartbeat later, Galen's body couldn't take it and he nearly lost control of his jet. That was the opening his fellow racer needed. The throttle revved up and he pushed through the holographic finish line, with Galen trailing him by three seconds: an eternity in ARC terms.

"And the winner of the A.R.C Championship for his third consecutive year isâ€¦JOHNNY MILLER!" came the announcement from Gabriel in the booth who was doing a play-by-play for audiences stuck at home across the galaxy. The crowd's cheer was deafening.

Galen slammed his fist on the glass canopy in frustration. He was so close! Sighing in defeat, he flew in the under-tunnels of the stadium along with the other racers. Because 99.99% of the time racers flew in the finish line at supersonic and hypersonic speeds, A.R.C regulations made it so the finish line of all A.R.C raceways have an airway tunnel that ran underneath the stadium. In other words, it took awhile for racers to go back to subsonic speeds to land safely so there was additional airspace to allow them to gradually slow down and then fly back casually to their designated garages for repairs.

Galen made his way through the airway with his head slightly down. As he exited the tunnel, he pulled up to make a steep climb and banked to the right, headed for his garage, or as the ARC racers called it, "the shop." Turning on VTOL, he hovered his jet above the landing pad where several of his crew chiefs were patiently waiting. The prodigy couldn't help but smile. His repairmen were grown men and women, yet they didn't treat him as a child.

He turned the engines off as soon as he touched ground and sighed. His crew automatically started doing diagnostics. Unhooking his seatbelt, he helped himself out of the cockpit and let them do their work. Crew chiefs rarely liked to be bothered by their pilots during repairs, and his were no exception. They'd speak about what happened at a later date. For now, he simply needed to get out of the way and let them do their jobs.

"Good job out there, Galen," came the voice of the A.R.C's champion Johnny Miller. With bright red hair, blue eyes, and a six-foot athletic frame, the 29-year old veteran racer stood out, even amongst his fellow competition, which included aliens (drell being the most common, a small minority of Draxians, Sangheili, and, oddly enough a _single_ Unggoy.) He towered over Galen's 5'6" frame.

"Thanks, Johnny," he replied. "I thought I had youâ€¦!"

Johnny smiled. "There's always next year, dude. Always next year. Keep practicing. You've got a lot to learn." Before he could get any

further, Johnny was called away by the press and media wanting statements. The pilot ate up the attention like a kid at a candy store.

"Yes, sir" came the prodigy's sardonic reply, rolling his eyes. Not really in the mood to make press statements or deal with Public Relations BS, Galen quietly slipped out in the crowd to his quarters as the other finishing racers touched down in their shops.

It wasn't far, roughly four blocks from the stadium. It was a small two-bedroom condo, with an upstairs. Because he was emancipated early, Galen could legally live by himself and had given a trusted close friend power of attorney to handle any legal matters that he wouldn't be able to deal with until he turned eighteen. The condo was certainly nice, but it wasn't luxurious, like the homes of the other professional racers. It fit Galen just fine, despite a seven-figure amount in his checking account.

"Master Antares, I'm sure you're aware that the press will be wanting a statement."

"I'm well aware, Harvey," he told his "dumb" Artificial Intelligence, as he made his way inside his room. Harvey had taken the appearance of a nerdy college professor. "I simply don't give a shit."

Harvey sighed. "Very well. Shall I assume you're going to play wargames?" It was his routine. He'd race, and regardless of how he placed, he would come home, shower, and put on fresh clean civilians clothes, and go out for a few rounds of wargames. It was how he stayed in shape.

"You know it, Harv," Galen grinned. "Mind booking me a place in Angel City? I don't need the attention in Soaring Heights."

"Because I am sure you won't draw attention over three-dozen miles away," Harvey had replied sardonically. But nonetheless the A.I. complied with his master's wishes. Galen smirked, and stepped into the bathroom, naked, with thoughts of kicking ass in the simulation.

He may not have been able to beat Johnny Miller, but winning a wargames simulation match?

Well, that'd be the next best thing.

* * *

><p>Soaring Heights Speedway

****Private Booth****

"Second place, huh? At only fourteen years old?" Allie expressed in bewilderment, whistling for good measure. She and Barrett were in a booth for VIPs that they had all to themselves. The two Cerberus agents were performing all types of surveillance and espionage as per the orders from the Illusive Man. He had used his extraordinary influence of being a ranking officer in the Office of Strategic Intelligence to get them privacy. Because Soaring Heights attracted hundreds of _millions_, even rich citizens had to plan on a budget to get great seats because of the markup and status symbol. They had

soundproofed the room with various gadgets, the moment they set up shop, so to speak.

"Kid's got a lot of talent. Dat's for darn sure," Barrett drawled, his southern US accent thick.

"He's a good pilot, but I still don't understand what makes him SIGMA material," Allie frowned.

"Me neither," Barrett admitted. "His file says he's an engineer as wellâ€|maybe dat's why?" Both of them shrugged. It wasn't their job to ask _too_ many questions.

"Who's next on the list?"

"Hmâ€|dis young lady here," Barrett intoned bringing up a hologram of another teenager, of Chinese descent, and long red hair with matching eyes.

"Scarlet Hong," Allie reported the obvious. "Born in Japan, moved to the United Kingdom as a child. Says here she's a biotic prodigy, same as that drell teenager Talia Habash, also a SIGMA candidate, by the way. No surprise there. Currently lives in London."

"Indeed. Now look a' here." Her hologram vanished and turned into a family tree. Allie's eyes widened.

"You're shitting me, right?" Allie said in disbelief.

" 'Fraid not ma'am," Barrett shook his head. Scarlet was the younger sister of Samuel Hong, Fireteam ARCLIGHT's second-in-command and Vincent Hong, another Cerberus agent. Allie and Barrett may have been the Illusive Man's left and right hand, but Vincent was still sent on solo black missions even the two of them were unaware of.

"What the hell is _with_ this family," she shook her head. Barrett simply chuckled, amused by his partner.

"That's something you're gonna have to ask the Man Upstairs, ma'am."

"I don't believe in God," Allie retorted flatly. Her partner seemed only amused, but let it go without arguing the point.

"Next?"

"Hmâ€|Dante Hendrixâ€|currently fifteen years old, lives in Constant. Apparently he's a Munitions engineering genius. Was almost kicked out of his high school for nearly blowing up his chemistry classroom, indicating potential in demolitions. Says here his father was an N7. Died trying to retake Kastella from the Batarians. They were apparently close. He's in foster care, now. OSI thinks he's prime SIGMA material."

Barrett grimaced. "Poor kid," he said, somewhat sympathetically.

"Since when did you have a soft spot for kids?" Allie smirked.

"I'm a Cerberus agent, not a monster," he rebuked her sharply, almost glaring.

She snorted. "Some would argue the difference alludes us."

"What's Shepard's current position?" He asked, changing the subject, immediately.

Allie shrugged and checked her wrist unit. "Says here she's still with HyÅ•sube." Allie had discreetly met the teenager in a market and put a tracker on her jacket, which, according to their observation, she never went without it. It was a gift from her father, and she clearly cherished it.

"The other SIGMA recruit?" He had to ask because they were going through a lot of files and even they had trouble keeping up with it all at times.

She nodded. "I still don't see why OSI wants teenagers. It seems kind of strange."

"Makes perfect sense when you think about it."

"Oh, really? Enlighten me, big guy."

Barrett smirked. "Tell me, how many kids have we dealt with in our line of work. I'm not talkin' bout killin' 'em. But just interacting with 'em."

Allie frowned. "None."

"Exactly. The last thing you'd expect is to be ambushed or killed by a kid. That's what espionage is about. Blending in. Counter surveillance would look for the typical young adults as spies and agents, not teenage brats. It's hiding in plain sight. Even if the kid is hyperactive and eccentric, that adds to the illusion if he or she can turn it on and off. As in "no spy would have the balls to draw attention to himself like that", and 99.99% of counterspies would ignore them completely."

"What about couriers? I know back during the Afghanistan War almost 170 years ago, several intelligence agencies used kids to deliver information and spied on the Taliban."

"And how many of those kids were actually trained by agencies to be forward deployed, know how to kill, escape, and were trained professionally how to fight, instead of just being glorified informants?"

"TouchÃ©. I take it there's more to it than that."

"You'd be right, of course," Barrett said pressing some buttons on his wrist unit. Several charts and statistics appeared in the booth.

"The Battle of Khar'shan?"

"At the end of the Batarian War, OSI observed a peculiar pattern. To make a long story short, OSI noticed that the younger a soldier entered the military, the more effective he was on the battlefield

years later. To give an example, say you joined the military at age 18 and I joined at 25. Even though we entered at the same time, had an equal amount of training, statistically, within 10 years you would be a better soldier than I. Obviously, there are exceptions, but the model holds. The older you get, the harder it is to get a sapient molded into the perfect soldier. Because there's a lot of truth to the saying 'old habits die hard'."

"It's a pattern that has repeated itself through human history. The Spartans of Greece being the most overt and obvious. Yes, a good reason why the Spartans were successful in holding off the Persian army was due to a strategic advantage, but no other army could've done what they did with so few men. The Spartans trained their warriors to instantly know how to kill in the most brutal and efficient way since the age of seven years old. They were, quite literally, an ancient form of being bred warriors. Had the Spartans had the numbers, they could've easily taken all of Greece."

"I see. So, if OSI gets teenagers and indoctrinate them with military and intelligence training, along with biomedical and mechanical augmentationsâ€|" Allie trailed off as the implications sunk in.

"Potentially, you'd have a group of spies able to switch from being the gods of espionage and black operations, but gods on the battlefield at the drop of the hat just like the OMEGA are now."

"Well I'll be damnedâ€|" Allie shook her head. "Makes you wonder why they haven't tried this with the OMEGA."

"Bad idea, Allison," Barrett scolded sharply. "When the OMEGA went public everything was declassified, except for where the location of their training was, their missions, the selection process, and, obviously how the augmentations and EXCALIBUR armor were made. Obviously, the rest of the galaxy would know this information as well, which may make certain operations involving the OMEGA difficult, if not impossible. As far the USG government is concerned, the SIGMA does not and will not exist. **Ever**. If OSI ever found out we knew about its existence we'd officially be dead men walking."

Allie gave him a whimsical smile. "We work for the Illusive Man. Aren't we already?"

Barrett gave a chuckle. "TouchÃ©."

They had spent the next three hours going over files, taking notes, forging documents, both electronic and paper, until an urgent message came to both of their wrist units: Zeta Encryption. Their eyes nearly popped out of their sockets. The Illusive Man only used Zeta Encryptions when it was a true genuine emergency.

FILE ENCRYPTED/EYES ONLY/ ZETA ENCRYPTION

_BARRETT, SAMPSON/ALLISON _

DECRYPTION KEY: [PERSONALIZED: "DATE OF PLEDGE OF LOYALTY"]

_FROM: T.I.M _

_SUBJECT: SHEPARD _

_EDEN PRIME DEFENSES COMPROMISED. ALL SHIPS IN THE UTOPIA FLEET
AFFECTED. SUSPECT AN INTELLIGENCE LEAK OF COLONEL GREYSTONE'S
LOCATION AMONG OTHERS. FLAG OFFICERS PRIME SUSPECTS. deLXE IS ON WAY
OR ALREADY PLANETSIDE. PROTECT SHEPARD AT ALL COSTS! PROBABLE TARGET.
CIVILIAN CASUALTIES ARE ACCEPTABLE. ALL MISSIONS ARE NOW SECONDARY .

_

FIND SHEPARD!

T.I.M

Allie went white as a sheet. "deLXE?! Is he serious?! Here?" Barrett didn't even bother answering her as he jumped up and to gather their things. Guns were checked, re-checked and checked again; surveillance equipment was folded and put away inside briefcases. deLXE (pronounced ****exactly**** like the English word "deluxe"), was a rebel organization that had been a thorn in the URSC for roughly five years, seemingly popping up out of nowhere. The Titan Drop Shock Troopers had decimated many of their bases and those raids were often lead by one Tyson Lamont Greystone. Tyson was infamous amongst not just deLXE but other small time militias and rebel groups. deLXE usually operated on the outer colonies in compartmentalized cells. For them to be brazen enough to attack one of the Big Five, or B5, outright spoke volumes, of how much they hated the Colonel.

'_Just how did they get past Eden Prime's defenses? Something isn't adding up hereâ€|' _Allie thought as she continued to gather her things at a quick pace. Eden Prime was a B5 planet and it had a plethora of defenses that deterred invasions, first and foremost were the Sangheili Empire's Assault Carriers that patrolled the outer rim of the Utopia system, along with a several URSC Naval battle groups to include an Atlas-class Dreadnought serving as the flagship. There were no manned ODPs in orbit, but Eden Prime was protected by 50 Strategic Defense platforms controlled by a network of A.I. linked together both in orbit and in the capital city of Constant. There was only one way a measly rebel group could get past thatâ€|

"Okay, is that everything?" Barrett asked in a rush, interrupting her thoughts.

"Yes," Allie said tersely, as she finished suiting up and preparing for war. Both of them had the very latest versions of the N7's Advanced Combat Infiltration Suit, or ACIS. Although Barrett's size suggests a walking tank, he was the leader of Cerberus' ****HELLHOUND**** troopers; a group of ex-Special Forces completely loyal to the Illusive Man. Covert direct action operations were second nature to the giant.

"All right, we need ta assume that deLXE is alreadyâ€"FUCK!" Barrett cursed, causing Allie to jump back a little. The Cerberus operative rarely cursed, compared to his female partner.

"What is it?"

"I just lost Shepard's signal. She's off the grid."

"This just keeps getting better and better," Allie growled in

frustration. Of all the times to lose her, fate chooses NOW of all times?! "Come on, Barrett, let's do this the old fashioned way."

The giant of a man nodded and the two left the private booth, turned on active camouflage and practically sprinted through the crowds, virtually invisible.

Barrett had to grimace as he saw all of the nuclear families, friends, and colleagues continue on without a care in the world.

"I know deLXE hates Colonel Greystone, but to attack a B5 planet? That's suicidal!"

"These are the same group of rebels fighting for fascism. How they think is beyond me, let alone how they're acting."

"Those bastards really just don't know how valuable Shepard is do they?"

Barrett shook his head. "They just want her dead."

He shuddered. If they knew Shepard was near the top of the list for the SIGMA program...no. He couldn't deal in hypotheticals. Only the now. And right now, the Illusive Man had given him and Allie direct orders to protect a target, rather than eliminate one.

Hey, there was a first time for everything, no?

* * *

><p>Soaring Heights Speedway

**Hours earlier **

"Ha! I knew he'd still win Shane! I win our bet," Alyx grinned, as Johnny Miller crossed the finish line. Johnny was her all time favorite racer and she had a poster of him back in her room. No one in the history of the A.R.C had three consecutive Championshipsâ€|until now that is.

Shane looked out in horror and disbelief. "Damn, he was so close!"

"Aww poor baby," Alyx snickered, rubbing his back in sympathy.

"Feel sorry enough to ignore this?" he said to her hopeful.

"Not on your life, big guy," she gave him a playful shove. "And we Shepards always collect our debts."

Shane grumbled and pulled out a few bills worth 20 credits. Even in the 22nd century, humanity and its alien allies still used physical currency, probably more out of habit and familiarity. They'd switch over to an all-electronic monetary system eventually, justâ€|not now.

"I'm so going to get you back for this," he vowed to her, shaking his fist. Alyx grabbed his hand, causing his heart to beat just a little faster. She gave him a pouted puppy-eyed look.

"Aww, are you mad at me?" she cooed with a flirtatious intonation.

"Yes," he said flatly.

She cupped his cheek. "Are you sure?"

"You really like touching me, don't you?"

"Maybeâ€|" You have no fucking idea. _

While the two teenagers were bantering back and forth, Tyson, Hannah, and Tarius were watching them from the top row of the stands. Kolyat was talking to a male drell he had met a few rows down. Like his human "cousin", he seemed to be smitten as well.

"Man, look at those two," Tarius shook his head. "All over each other."

"So long as he doesn't get too handsy with my daughter, I'm fine with it," Hannah shrugged. She honestly liked the kid, but even still, she sheltered her daughter admittedly, and he was still a teenage boy. Who knows what might happen?

Tyson snorted. "They're going to have sex eventually. Deal with it, Hannah," he told his wife bluntly.

The rear admiral nearly recoiled in shock at her husband's candidness. "Tyson! How can you say that? She's only fourteen! Far too youngâ€|" "

"Answer me this," Tarius interjected, trying to play mediator between the spouses. "If you went up to her and told Alyx that she couldn't see Shane, or any other boys, what do you think will happen? Do you honestly think she'll just bow her head and obey you like the crew of the Annihilation does when you give them an order?"

That shut Hannah up immediately. She huffed. "I suppose you're right," she reluctantly admitted. "Still, though, where are his parents? They give him a lot of independence in a place like thisâ€|" "

"I already talked to them. They're fine with it and trust us," Tyson told a surprised Hannah. Of course, Shane's mother was a retired N7 who had worked directly under Admiral Ishigami and worked with the colonel and Tarius in the outer colonies in counter-terrorism operations, so it was no surprise that she trusted the two of them with her life, let alone her son's.

"Well, well Colonel. What a surprise to see you here."

Tyson and Tarius' eyes went wide, recognizing the voice. They turned to see Captain Dorian Sejanus himself, along with his protÃ©gÃ©, Major Marcus Lector. Both were dressed in casual civilian clothing, but it didn't take a rocket scientist to figure out they were active military.

"Captain Sejanus," Tyson acknowledged blandly, grimacing. Even now, he still was unsure of what his opinion of the Captain was. Tarius howeverâ€|"

"The hell do you want?" Tarius gritted his teeth. "Shouldn't you be sucking up to some the Admiralty or tending to your crew? Lord knows that's the only reason they let a prick like you commandeer the _Daedalus_."

Sejanus had raised an eyebrow, but otherwise didn't react to the retired TDST drell. "For your information, a good many of my crew is on shore leave and the _Daedalus_ is in orbit, run by a skeleton crew. Even I enjoy vacations."

"Captain Sejanus—it's a pleasure to meet you," Hannah said standing up, ignoring her husband and close friend's rudeness.

"Likewise, ma'am," he replied respectfully. She was still a Rear Admiral, after all. "I'd like you to meet my close friend and protégé, Marcus Lector."

"It's an honor to meet you Colonel, Sergeant Major, Admiral" Marcus praised, blushing. Despite his annoyance with Sejanus, Tyson couldn't help but smile. Tarius just nodded. He didn't take his eyes off the Captain.

"So, what's the deal, _Captain_? I find it highly unlikely you'd seek us out—"

"Straight to the point. Something we share in common," he noted.

"I'm _nothing_ like you," Tarius choked out bitterly. Sejanus ignored him.

"I was instructed to give this to you personally, Colonel," Sejanus told them simply, giving Tyson a data disc.

"By whom?" Hannah asked her curiosity piqued.

"Admiral Ishigami," he answered simply. "It's password protected by a code only you and your husband or you would know, so even I don't know what's on it. Be warned, if you enter the code wrong once even by accident, the disc will auto erase every file on there."

"And she couldn't just send us an email?"

Sejanus snorted. "Of course not. Whatever is on that disc is probably classified. The Admiral wouldn't have done this if she didn't have a good reason." Sejanus himself _really_ hated being an errand boy, but _no one_ refused a "request" from Ishigami. Even _entertaining_ the idea sent shivers down his spine. "Now then, I'll assume my presence isn't welcome here much longer, so I'll take my leave."

"Please," Tarius insisted. Marcus shook his head apologetically, but nonetheless followed his Captain.

Hannah frowned. "What was that about?" She ignored the disc for the moment.

"The guy just rubs me the wrong way. He's far too power hungry for his own good," Tyson shook his head while silently holding the disc in his hand, wondering what was so important that the Admiral herself

would use a courier. He grunted. If she wanted him and Tarius back in the game, it was going to be a no. He had a daughter to raise and a wife to love. In short, Ishigami could go fuck herself if that was the case.

"And he's just a dick in general," Tarius added. "He was the captain of the _Obama_ when the URSC liberated Zestiria. Of course, it was the Systems Alliance back then. I was glad to make that drop."

"He seemed okay to me," she insisted.

"Only because you outrank him," Tarius insisted. "Justâ€|take our word for it, okay? We'll figure out what this disc says when we go back to the hotel."

She sighed. "All right." Before any of them could broach the subject any further, Alyx and Shane came up to them, a broad smile on her daughter's face. She couldn't remember a time seeing her so happy.

"So, momâ€|dadâ€|can we ask you a favor?"

Both of her parents looked at each other, before nodding simultaneously.

Alyx took a deep breath. "Can Shane and I go play War Games in Angel City? It's supposed to be a state-of-the-art!"

"Angel City is 40 miles from here. Why can't you two play War Games here?"

"Because everyone else already is! Mom, please. I love Soaring Heights, but there are way too many people here."

"She's got a point, babe," Tyson nodded. "I could use a change of scenery. Besides. It's not like we can't afford it." He was frugal by nature, and with his retirement, savings from constant deployments, seven figure settlement for the HUNTER ordeal, and adding in Hannah's six figure active duty pay for being a flag officer, the Shepard family was pretty darn wealthy at the moment.

She thought it over for a few moments and acquiesced. "All right, angel, we'll go. But, Shaneâ€|as much as I like youâ€|I don't like you enough to pay for your way there."

'Damn_ that was cold,' _Tarius thought, laughing inwardly. Alyx and her father had cringed.

"That's fine Mrs. Shepard. I got my own way," he assured her, taking her bluntness in stride. "Alyx and I can go now, and we can meet you guys tonight."

Hannah narrowed her eyes. "Alyx, you, _and Kolyat_, can go now," she said, her tone icy. Tyson simply shook his head.

The young teenager started to sweat bullets from the older Shepard. "Ohâ€|right. Yeah, he should come too."

"I'll go get him," Tarius volunteered, standing up, and gathering his things. While he was making his way towards Kolyat, he noticed a man

in simple clothing silently observing the Shepard family from the balcony above, specifically at Alyx herself. Thinking he was some kind of weird pervert, the drell gave him a hard glare, and the man backed off immediately. Satisfied, Tarius thought nothing more of the man.

However, the man pulled out a throwaway cell phone and dialed some numbers. "This is Benoitâ€| Alpha Sierra is here. I repeat Alpha Sierra is here, along with Tango Golf and Tango Kilo."

"Can you engage?"

"Negative. Surrounded on all sides. Alpha Sierra headed toward Angel City. Recommend full deployment of all assets."

"Very well. Assets will deploy in five hotels. We have the authorization codes from Golf Hotel. Be ready." The voice on the other end, hung up. Immediately, the operative began tearing his phone apart, piece-by-piece. He threw the battery in a nearby trashcan, crushed the SIM card, poured out the liquid state drive into a drain, and threw the main body in a trashcan on the outside of the stadium hundreds of meters away, wiping each component free of fingerprints and disposing of them with gloves.

He had to smile. Soon, he and his brothers and sisters would have their revenge on the bastard who destroyed entire cells of their organization. And it would start with his daughter.

She would pay for the sins of her father.

* * *

><p>URSC Daedalus, Geosynchronous Orbit of Eden Prime

July 25**th****, 2168**

The URSC _Daedalus_ sailed tranquilly in the void around humanity's largest colony, population wise. Despite its exceptionally enormous size and its status as not only the URSC Navy's Flagship, but also currently the largest starship in the known galaxy, the Daedalus' engines were able to move through the void at tremendously fast speeds.

As of the moment, the vast majority of its 90,000 strong crew was on shore leave on Eden Prime. Ever since Ambassador Abu had formally established relations with the Citadel, they had been working double shifts for the past month or so. Captain Sejanus had practically ordered the crew to take a weeklong vacation, to their delight. Because Eden Prime was so heavily guarded and its population rivaled early 21st century Earth, this was one of the few places (aside from Axiom Prime, Earth, Arcturus, and New Sanghelios) that captains were legally allowed to have a majority of its members on shore leave. As such, the ship, as of now, was practically a ghost town, and calling the current occupants a "skeleton crew" was being extremely generous. There wasn't even an AI aboard the ship at the moment, which was unusual, especially for a flagship.

Julius, the leader of OMEGA's coveted Fireteam ARCLIGHT, walked down the empty hallways of the Daedalus, flanked by his executive officer,

Samuel "Sam" Hong. Both elite super soldiers were, for once, without their armor. Instead they wore the tight skinsuits that was worn underneath the EXCALIBUR Powered Assault Armor. Sam had his monomolecular sword attached to his back magnetically. Julius looked amused, as they crossed a window where Utopia shone brightly on his light-brown skin.

"So, what's the word, boss?" Sam asked, as the two stepped into an elevator. "They splitting us up or what?"

Julius shook his head. "I haven't heard anything, but I honestly doubt it. We work too well together."

Sam was referring to the Security Council's decision to split the OMEGAs to work in teams of three universally, instead of the usual four, five, and in ARCLIGHT's case, six. During the Battle of Khar'shan, the OMEGA had to be spread out as efficiently and strategically as possible due to millions upon millions of enemy troops. OSI had found that teams of three were the most effective; even it was a bit unorthodox to traditional military doctrine. With an executive order from Xavier himself, the entire OMEGA from the top down began to reorganize, with sometimes brand new Fireteams being created. The exceptions, so far, were: Blue Team, NOBLE Team, Red Team, and Gray Team, all, not coincidentally, SPARTAN-IIIs and IIIs. The brass was still reviewing Fireteam ARCLIGHT.

Sam grunted. "O-Deck," the OMEGA called out and the OLED panel ran their picture IDs and their current security clearance: 6. OMEGA soldiers had fluctuating security clearances that increased or decreased depending on how classified their mission was.

"Confirmed, OMEGA, Samuel Hong and Julius Halcyon. Proceeding to the O-Deck."

"Look, Sam, I won't let them separate us, all right?" He tried to give his friend some reassurance. "If push comes to shove we can get Commander John-117 to vouch for us."

Sam didn't look convinced. "I guess."

Julius was about to respond, but he received a hail from the bridge. "This is Julius," he answered the hail.

"Lieutenant." It was Captain Sejanus' executive officer. "We have maintenance crews coming aboard in ten mikes."

Julius was confused. "Umâ€|sir, with all due respect, why did I need to know this?"

"Well, they aren't part of the Daedalus' original crew, so I didn't want you become alarmed seeing workers you didn't recognize. I know how you OMEGA operate," he said with a slight roll of his eyes.

"I see," Julius replied. "Noted. Has Captain Sejanus been informed?"

"Order came from the top, signed off by the Captain himself. I got the authorization code right in front of me. I really hate the fact that Leonidas had to be unplugged from the Daedalus' subsystems. It's making work ten times harder, even if it is, supposedly, only a few

hours." Leonidas was the Smart A.I assigned to the Flagship, who had been unplugged. Because of the classified nature of the files inside the central network, just replacing Leonidas while he was away with any ol' Smart A.I was enormously illegal, because of the URSC charter outright mandating that every single Artificial Intelligence be compartmentalized with what information they were allowed to know, built literally right into their matrix when they're created. In other words, even if a military officer told an A.I. outright classified information it wasn't supposed to know, the A.I's programming from its birth wouldn't record it for it to remember afterwards. Officially, this was to protect against capture in case self-termination failed, but unofficially, this prevented from banding together (an **extremely** unlikely scenario, but one the URSC was prepared for anyhow) either from an outside group corrupting their data matrices or from them willingly turning on their organic masters.

"Why'd he get unplugged?" Sam asked, curious.

"Apparently, he thinks he has some major glitches in his system. And he was sent to Constant for a full diagnostic and repair if needed. The Eggheads said it would be no more than an hour."

"He couldn't do a self-diagnostic on the most advanced ship in the galaxy? You're kidding me, right?" Sam couldn't believe what he was hearing.

"And risk him infecting millions of exabytes of information that would take weeks to fully assess and repair, in the off chance the problem is major, when we don't have too? Absolutely not. Even isolating his black box poses a ton of logistical problems that I'd rather not get into. Believe me when I say it's far more complicated than it looks. The URSC would rather err on the side of caution."

"All right. Thanks for the heads up, Commander." Julius shut the link. "Hundred years later, and AIs can still technically get 'sick'. Unbelievable."

He shook his head. "I am surprised Captain Sejanus isn't back, yet."

"The Captain must really not want to leave Eden Prime," Sam joked, as the elevator stopped on the O-Deck.

"Can you blame him?"

Sam tipped his head in acknowledgement of his point. Both super soldiers stepped out on the Daedalus' O-Deck, a deck specifically for OMEGA soldiers and their technicians. Aesthetically, it was similar to the S-Deck on the URSC Infinity, but it was much larger and far more sophisticated. Up to 800 of humanity's best warriors could be housed here, permanently, with the ability to deploy 2000 in a genuine emergency.

Currently speaking, however, there were very few fireteams on the O-Deck, as many OMEGA had applied to be permanently stationed on the state-of-the-art flagship, far more than ship could hold. As a result, there were less than 20 OMEGA here right now, most of them scattered doing their own thing.

Julius and Sam located the rest of ARCLIGHT in one of the many briefing rooms scattered across the deck. The inside was darkened, reflecting the intense mood. In the center of the room was a holographic projection that kept playing a video over and over again, from different angles.

"Julius, Sam," all of them acknowledged with a nod.

"Ugh!" Anya cried out in frustration, as the video paused again. "This doesn't make sense!" She pounded her fist on the metal table for emphasis

"What doesn't?"

"I managed to piece together Fireteam Crimson and Fireteam Majestic's helmet cam footage, and made a third person model, showing what happened before theyâ€|expired," Lark, ARCLIGHT's tech expert, explained with a frown. "The results areâ€|inconclusive." The shorter OMEGA had her hair down, instead of the usual bun.

"Rightâ€|the HUNTERSâ€|" Sam nodded, remembering being briefed on them by the Commander, after Blue Team had somewhat recovered.

"What's the issue? We're OMEGA, team. Not all of us are going to walk away from every skirmish. We were taught that from Day 1."

Mike, the team's heavy gunner and demolitions specialist, snorted. "Computer, play from the beginning, Fireteam Crimson Point-of-View, third person." Apparently, Mike had a point to make. As Mike had ordered, the hologram in the center of the room vanished and was replaced with the five members of Fireteam Crimson, from an isometric angle. It seemed to be a fairly routine patrol, judging from the casual alertness from the SPARTAN-IV team. That was their first mistake, Sam noted. Before he could note any others, it happened: a HUNTER had appeared near the center of their formation. Both Sam and Julius flinched, visibly. They were watching a simple recording and _they_ were caught off guard. Crimson apparently was too. The HUNTER had already formed some type of blue blade, akin to the OMEGA's own hardlight swords and, eviscerated Crimson's leader before he could react. The Turian didn't even allow the SPARTAN's body to fall before he executed a biotic chargeâ€|_significantly_ more powerful than even Alastor, ARCLIGHT's sole bioticâ€|at another SPARTAN denting her armor and sending her crashing into a nearby edifice with tremendous force. Finally seeming as if they had gotten their act together, the team opened fire. To Julius' bewilderment, the HUNTERS shielding stopped the Hybrid rounds and he fired back with his own assault rifle, forcing the soldiers into cover. Crimson-4, had tried to go in on the Turian's flank, trying for close-quarters. Unfortunately, the Spartan had far underestimated the HUNTER's strength and speed, and he was cut down almost immediately, along with the rest of his team moments later. In less than two minutes all of Crimson lay either dead or dying. The video ended there.

"Whatâ€|Iâ€|." Julius was speechless. "What the fuck?"

"Now do you see the problem? One of those goddamned HUNTERS was able to take out an entire OMEGA Fireteam single handedly. And you and I only know four other URSC soldiers who could do the same thingâ€|"

Truthfully, there were more who could, but Anya wasn't sure if they counted quite yet, as they technically weren't part of the military.

Sam nodded. "Lieutenant Commander Fredric-104, Tenu'Ryuum, Nathan-B312, and Commander-John-117 himself"

"Jesus Christ"

"And the Commander was able to defeat that asshole?"

Julius grimaced. "Barely, but he did nonetheless. Just to give himself a challenge, I remember the Commander taking down OMEGA squadrons by himself. If that Turian was able to nearly kill him as he did, then logically Crimson team had no chance of coming out alive." He turned to Alastor. "You're the biotic. What's your assessment of that particular skill?"

Alastor didn't miss a beat and stoically replied. "Their biotics are stronger than mine. That's the one area these Citadel aliens have us beat by orders of magnitude." Most civilians made the assumption that OMEGA biotics were more skillful and powerful than the biotics in the Marines, TDST, Army Infantry, N7, and Orbital Assault Troopers. That simply wasn't the case at all. Biotics were simply too new to human physiology to attempt any type of augmentations to make them stronger, at least for the moment, without any serious ethical violations, and as a result most of the OMEGA had L3 implants. Because of this, there were definitely biotics in the N7 who were more skilled with their abilities than their super soldier allies. With the help of the Zestirians, Humanity was catching up as quickly as they could within the moral code of the entire URSC military, but they sure as hell had a long way to go, relative to the Citadel. That was their primary advantage in ground engagements and the Council would exploit it, if it came down to war, or even a proxy war.

"Man, I don't know about you guys, but it felt nice being the biggest badass in the galaxy," Anya complained. "That sure as hell didn't last long."

"We still are," Alastor insisted. "Cortana believes the team that was able to defeat Crimson and Majestic, were the best of the HUNTERS. She seems fully confident that any of their other soldiers won't be as strong."

"Oh, so we won't get killed as fast," Anya rolled her eyes, her words dripping with cynicism. "That makes me feel so much better."

Sam glared at the sniper. "No one is dying on this team. Not if I can help it."

"Did you not see the video Sam?" Anya challenged, nearly getting into the swordsman's face. Anya was only a couple inches shorter than Sam, so she stared him down directly.

"Well, there's only one thing to do then," Julius butted in, ignoring Anya and Sam. "So any of you feel like making a trip to Titan to see the Grandmaster? What better way to get stronger? I doubt a galactic war is going to pop off in the next six months."

Alastor looked surprised. "The Draedi have already moved to Titan? That was fast. Their HQ in Zestiria is a pile of radioactive ash."

Julius shrugged. "Well, we are known for efficiency and lack of red tape."

"I'm down," Sam instantly replied, serious. "It's been about ten months since we were last there."

"Yeah, and we got our asses completely handed to us on a silver platterâ€|" Mike grumbled, not really looking forward to the Order's training sessions. "They absolutely wrecked us. It wasn't even close."

"Do you want to end up like Crimson and Majestic?"

There was a beat.

"â€|I'll take that ass handing for 200," Anya smirked.

"We'll need the Captain's permission," Lark pointed out. "He's on vacation."

"So?" Mike grinned. "Just means the ol' bastard might be in a good mood." ARCLIGHT chuckled collectively. "No time like the present." Everyone turned to Julius. "You're the boss, Julius. It's your call. Quite literally, in fact."

He rolled his eyes, but nonetheless made the hail. Captain Sejanus answered rather quickly, as his hologram appeared inside the briefing room. He was still dressed in his casual clothes and since he wasn't in uniform, none of the OMEGA saluted. "Lieutenant? What can I do for you?"

"Sir, my team would like to request a temporary duty reassignment to Titan."

Sejanus' burrowed his eyebrows. "That's all the way in Sol. Why do you wish to go there?" His voice sounded neutral, but everyone in the room present could detect the undercurrent of disdain that ARCLIGHT had better have a damn good reason to request a reassignment near the Home Fleet.

"The Draedi Order, sir."

Dorian pursed his lips. "I see." Of course, Captain Sejanus had heard of the highly secretive and legendary Order. From what limited knowledge he had, the Draedi were a group of biotic Caleans who made up an Order that operated to keep the peace in Zestirian society. Although biotic manifestation in Caleans was the rarest, statistically, among all of the sapient races among the United Race Space Command (in fact, quantity wise, there were more Unggoy biotics than Caleans), the few biotics among the lizard aliens were exceptionally powerful, which is why the Draedi Order was made exclusively of them, each either from the Zestirian DRAGMA Special Forces or from the Royal Special Task Force, with decades of combat experience. They were already a force to be reckoned with (they took no causalities during the invasion), but with access to the URSC's advanced weapons, armor, and shielding, any one of them was

a literal one-lizard army. He had heard from scuttlebutt that OSI had let them field-test various weaponry under a veil of utmost secrecy, well before the Batarrians had invaded.

They took no sides, and if a situation called for it, there were even rumors that they had the authority to even assassinate the Kings if it was in the name of the greater good. Sejanus himself dismissed that rumor as pure nonsense.

"I didn't realize that the Draedi trained OMEGA," Sejanus' noted dryly.

"They don'tâ€¦_officially_â€¦sir." The Captain got the implied meaning, immediately: This was classified and he needed to keep his mouth shut. If he didn't have the need-to-know, they wouldn't have told him.

"How long will you be gone? It's already bad enough I'm working with a skeleton crew. It's hard to do much of anything on the _Daedalus_, though I suppose that's my fault."

"Umâ€¦sir, you sent maintenance crews here," Sam interjected, standing by Julius' side. "They'll help lighten the load."

"Maintenance crews? What are you talking about?"

Julius and Sam glanced at each other. "You know? The authorizations you signed? We have maintainers not part of the original crew to give us assistance wherever we need, seeing as how most of the crew is planetside at the moment on _your_ orders."

Sejanus stared at the two OMEGA hard, almost glaring. "Lieutenant, I _literally_ haven't touched _any_ paperwork since the A.R.C championship started. When I said I was taking a break, I _meant_ it. Who the _hell_ is on my ship?!" he bellowed, his fist clenching in fury. Heads were going to roll, and some unlucky sailors were going to be losing rank and privileges.

"So if you didn't sign anything, then who are theâ€¦" Julius' eyes widened. "Oh, _fuck_ me."

As if on cue, the _Daedalus'_ alarms started ringing throughout the entire starship. The ship's computerized voice came over the intercom, and said in the most pleasant of voices.

"**ATTENTION. ALL COMBAT TEAMS ARE TO PREPARE FOR BOARDER DEFENSE. THIS IS NOT A DRILL.**"

"MOVE, ARCLIGHT!" Julius ordered, springing into action. The super soldiers all moved in unison, moving at inhuman speeds. The few fireteams on the O-Deck were scrambling to get their armor on as quickly as they could. ARCLIGHT came up to their designated armor deployment station, and they were immediately suited up as the station's sensors detected their biometrics. In less than thirty seconds, the entire team was suited up and ready for war.

"Commander, can I get a SITREP?" Julius called out to the bridge. There was silence. "Commander? This OMEGA Julius-225 calling on

Emergency Channel X, Priority Alpha!" There was still silence.
"Dammit!"

"No use, commander. Comms are down," Lark spoke using her technical skills to interface with a nearby terminal. "Waitâ€|" she started to press more icons on the holographic interface on her forearm.
"That'sâ€|impossible!"

"What's going on, Lark?" Sam asked, frowning.

"It's very faint and even _I _almost missed it, but there are authorization orders that are heavily encrypted in the subroutines of the ship's main computer. Whoever has the balls to attack and board the _Daedalus_? He or she is getting by with _genuine_ codes. This isn't an intrusion. They came aboard practically with welcome arms and the computer only recognized them as boarders until they started opening fire."

"WHAT?!" Now everything was starting to fall into place: the removal of Leonidas, the current skeleton crew, and the fake authorization codes to forge the Captain's signature, the timing of the A.R.C championship, among others. This was a _massive_ coordinated and planned assault that had to have taken weeks to put together, and if Lark was correct, it HAD to originate from someone in the highest levels of the USG government.

Before ARCLIGHT could think any further on the _enormous_ implications of that fact, there was a massive explosion in the O-Deck. Dozens of figures poured in taking positions and laying suppressive fire, forcing the super soldiers into cover. Sam had recognized them immediately, as he had fought them before in the outer colonies, before the OMEGA went public. Their attire was unmistakable: blue and grey armor, tattoos, red glowing eyes, and use of the old, but heavily modified M-55 Assault Rifle.

"It's deLXE! OPEN FIRE!"

All out war had come to the Flagship of the URSC Navy.

(END)

There you have it! The introduction to the villains for the mini-arc before the next major story arc, and you have the introduction to the Draedi (who are going to become very important later on.) I'm planting a lot of seeds in the next few chapters, and I look forward to the payoff when it's all said and done.

Oh, and I have another OC category for those who wanna tackle it! I need a character that is an investigative reporter _**FROM THE CITADEL**_ (in other words, a Salarian, Asari, Turian, Volus, etc). He/she is the equivalent of Lois Lane when it comes to digging for the truth and will leave no stone unturned. This category I will be loose on, but because it's not really a military combat type character, I'm going to be looking for some _serious_ creativity. So put your thinking caps on ladies and gentlemen! BTW, if you can correctly guess what said reporter is going to be investigating (there are hints throughout the _entire_ story, trust me), you will _**automatically**_ be chosen.

Oh, and the Long Night of Solace needs a new name! What do you guys

think? I'll give about two chapters before I choose one!

Codex:

****HELLHOUND-**** Cerberus' HELLHOUND soldiers are the elite covert Special Forces wing of the highly secretive organization. While the HELLHOUNDS are absolutely NOT super soldiers in the traditional sense, a single HELLHOUND is more than a match for a URSC N7 operative or rookie Council SPECTRES. Every HELLHOUND operative uses state-of-the-art equipment and bleeding edge technology either acquired by the Illusive Man from OSI or original research and development done by Cerberus scientists. HELLHOUNDS have pledged their entire lives to the goals of Cerberus', and as such they are fanatically loyal to the Illusive Man. The current leader of the HELLHOUNDS is Barrett Sampson, the Illusive Man's right-hand man.

****Draedi Order (pronounced "DRAY-DEE)- ****The Draedi Order is a highly coveted, yet highly secretive Order made almost entirely of Caelean warriors. Because the Order existed centuries before the Draxians and Caeleans came together to form a Global Pact, the Draedi are almost completely independent from both the Zestirians and subsequently, the Unified Species Government. The Draedi, similar the Asari Justicar, were tasked to keep the peace and punish evil wherever they might find it, first Zestiria, and now, the entire Galaxy.

Every single member of the Draedi is a biotic, and because biotic manifestation in Caeleans is exceptionally rare, the Order is very strict in its rules of admission. The Draedi's members are exceptionally powerful, with even its lower ranked Paladins members being more than a match for a SPARTAN-II.

During the Batarian Invasion of Zestiria, despite the technological disparity, the Draedi were able to inflict massive casualties to the invaders, without a single loss. The Draedi, unknown to the public, also assisted in the OMEGA's training, especially teaching their biotics to control and develop their abilities. Technically, any sapient belonging to the Unified Species Government regardless of being civilian or military, can apply to be trained by the order. However, in practice, because the Draedi's training is extremely difficult and brutal, only Sangheili Special Operations Soldiers and OMEGA can keep up with the physical training. That being said, there are a small number of sapient biotics who do train with the Draedi to develop their abilities, of all species, the most common, oddly enough, are drell. Any sapient who has the privilege of becoming a Zadi, pledge to keep the secrets of the Order, including the identities of the other Zadi, be they Spartans, human, alien, or otherwise.

The current Headquarters of the Draedi Order is located in the Sol System on one of Saturn's moon, Titan. Titan is home to half-a-million colonists, with most being human.

****Draedi Order Ranks****

****Grandmaster of the Draedi-****Leader of the Entire Order, Biotic Master, and Master of all four biotic fighting arts of the Order, generally considered the deadliest warrior in the USG space. The current grandmaster of the Draedi is Grandmaster T'Zaria, one of the first members of the DRAGMA Special Forces.

****Draedi Master-** ****Biotic Masters, Master of at least three of the arts of the Draedi Order. There are only four masters in the entire order and they assist the Grandmaster with the day-to-day affairs of the Order. Most masters are usually around 450 years old, with centuries of combat experience.**

****Draedi Dragoon-******Considered "Proficient" with their biotics, and master of at least two of the four styles**. **In truth, there is not much real difference between the Dragoons and Paladins, in terms of skill, but the distinction exists because of political reasons.**

****Draedi Paladin** **â€"****** Paladins are the lowest ranked and outnumber the Masters, and Dragoons combined. Paladins are "proficient" (by Draedi standards, mind you) with their biotics and are usually forward "deployed" all throughout the entirety of the Galaxy, with most operating in the Terminus Systems.**

****Draedi Zadi-** ****A Zadi is a term that means "student" in the ancient Zestrian language. The Draedi use the word to refer to an apprentice to a Dragoon or Paladin, or any of the hopeful warriors who wish to join the Order. Any OMEGA who requests to train with the Draedi is referred as "Zadi" then their name. For example, John-117 would be referred to as "Zadi-John" for any time he spent training with the Order. However, no matter how skilled a Zadi may be during training, if the Zadi is not a Biotic he or she ****cannot**** be made a Paladin therefore, ****not**** a member of the Order. If Alastor were to graduate to Paladin, he would outrank John by the Order, but would be subordinate to him, during military operations.**

****DRAGMA-** ****The DRAGMA are the Special Operations force of the Zestirians, specifically the Caleans, and now subsequently, they've been absorbed into the URSC, under the direct control of the URSC Army. Due to a technological disadvantage, the true potential of the bipedal lizard aliens were unknown. This all changed during the invasion of Khar'shan, where the DRAGMA were, literally, the first forces to arrive on the planet. Backed with URSC weapons, and energy shielding, the DRAGMA slaughtered the Batarian S.T.R.I.K.E units. Like the Sangheili, Caleans don't need to be augmented like their human brethren and thus their level of power can be achieved naturally. Because of the size of the Caleans, DRAGMA very rarely use plasma-kinetic weaponry; instead they prefer the weapons of the Sangheili Empire (i.e Plasma Repeaters, Needle Rifles, Energy lances)**

****deLXE (Pronounced "Deluxe")-****** deLXE is a sophisticated rebel organization operating in the outer colonies. deLXE has no specific grievances with the USG government, but in a rare twist, the stated goal of deLXE is to impose fascism and a totalitarian galactic government, believing that the USG is too weak-minded to take over the galaxy. deLXE operates in compartmentalized cells that operate through heavily encrypted channels to communicate, which makes finding its members difficult. OSI believes the "LXE" in the name of the organization refers to three leaders, but haven't yet confirmed.**

****Wargames-** ****Wargames, universally refer to virtual reality or hard light games that simulateâ€|wellâ€|war. Civilian wargames are commonplace among the major cities of all the colonies, and are**

relatively inexpensive, being akin to a high-tech version of the 20th century game "Laser Tag". Military Wargames are far, far more sophisticated, with uses of hard light technology to simulate virtually any kind of environment, with OMEGA Wargames, even simulating pain without ill effects. Only until recently have Wargame simulations been installed on URSC starships, most of them being newer Leader-class Heavy carriers such as the URSC Barack H. Obama. Older starships still use old school ranges and physical obstacle course, albeit using hard light technology.

****Tsunagi-** ****Japanese** for "connect", Tsunagi is the the URSC's most popular social media site on the Extranet with tens of billions of active accounts. Created by the late Japanese businessman Hikaru Tsunagi in 2056, Tsunagi became a juggernaut in connecting the colonies to Earth and Sol, being the first site to offer real time communication across interstellar distances, previously reserved only for military and government officials. Tsunagi is now headquartered on New Sanghelios, and, oddly enough, its current CEO is a Sangheili, a sign of the Unified Earth's Government's tireless efforts of integrating humanity and its alien allies and promoting diversity.

17. Across the Sea Part I

Mass Effect: The New Journey****

Chapter Seventeen: **_Across the Sea Part I_**

Sorry this came out later than I intended. Fucking real life, man. But let's get it!

Disclaimer: I make no claim of anything except my own work. Mass Effect, Halo and Titanfall are under the rights of Bioware, 343 Industries, and Respawn Entertainment, as well as the publishing rights of Electronic Arts, Microsoft Game Studios, Electronic Arts, all respectively.

* * *

><p>Eden Prime

****Angel City ****

****July 25****th****, 2168 ****

Angel City was roughly forty miles from the economic juggernaut that was Soaring Heights. The city, however, was as well known as any of the famous capitals on Earth, such as Paris, Tokyo, D.C. etc, for one particular reason: it was the site of the **_first_** deployment of the Titan Drop Shock Troopers, nearly a decade after Eden Prime was first settled. A militia group had risen up to protest the interference of the, then, Systems Alliance government, and had taken over Angel City with plans to attack the capital of Constant. Rather than let the situation get out of hand, the Systems Alliance deployed the TDST and with the help of their Titan mechs, completely massacred the militia group with no casualties. Although Hammond Industries mainly manufactured Titans on Axiom Prime, the HQ of the corporation was located on Eden Prime, primarily for historical reasons, as noted above.

"Sure does bring back memories doesn't Ty?" Tarius smiled as their shuttle approached HISP, or Hammond Interstellar Spaceport. The port doubled as both a spaceport and an airport, as all spaceports in the URSC were designed by law to save costs. The "runways" of HISP actually weren't embedded on the "ground" like traditional airports on Earth back in the 21st century. Instead there was a large structural building that served as the control tower that had several runways that stuck "out" at various heights above the surface on the tower itself. It was akin to a radio tower where antennas stuck out at various heights, but the "antenna" in this case were several runways. The longer the runway that stuck out of the control tower, the larger the aircraft or starship could support it. The larger ones were roughly three miles long and were supported by a combination of suspension cables made out of Titanium-A3 and good ol'd fashion reinforced concrete support beams underneath.

"Yeah, bro," Tyson replied with a smile. He was a mere Sergeant fifteen years ago, stationed on Eden Prime. "We had a lot of good drops here."

"Ahem?" Hannah raised her eyebrow, as if daring her husband to say the wrong thing.

Tyson laughed nervously. "Oh, come on, babe, you know I enjoyed meeting you too."

'_Yeah, and by meeting, you mean you two sneaking off to screw each others' brains out while I covered for you,' _Tarius thought, shaking his head.

"Uh huh," Hannah rolled her eyes. "Has Alyx texted you, yet?" she switched the subject, not really in the mood to argue over something she would get over by tonight.

Tyson checked his phone. "Yeah, says the three of them are already playing a match. May be awhile before they respond."

"Of course," Hannah grunted, before standing up, grabbing her things, and leaving her husband and Tarius behind.

"The fuck is her problem?" Tyson asked indignantly, to no one in particular.

"If there is one thing I will never understand about you humans, is your females," Tarius shook his head, as they gathered their things and headed towards customs.

"They're a mystery to all sapient life," Tyson grunted. "I would post this on my Tsunagi account, butâ€¦|you know how well that would go."

Tarius simply nodded and followed his friend to their hotel room.

(line break)

Tyson sat on the bed and finally opened his laptop. "Sure you want to do this now, Hannah?"

She nodded. "Yes. No time like the present. Let's hear what Admiral Ishigami wanted." Apparently, she had gotten over whatever had her pissed off at her husband. He resisted the urge to roll his eyes. Taking the disc out of his pocket, he inserted it inside the computer. It booted up in microseconds.

"Alright two passwords. Says here the first one is theâ€" Tyson froze completely.

Hannah tilted her head in confusion. "Are you okay, honey?"

"Ye-Yeah, I'm good, sorry," he quickly apologized, trying to hide the inner panic as he read the first question.

_How were you _**really**_ born, Colonel? _

"Just asking where I was born," Tyson said, nervously. He subtly wiped his hands that became sweaty. He gave a quick glance to Tarius, silently telling the drell to shut his mouth.

Hannah looked at him incredulously. "Seriously? What kind of secret passcode is that?"

Tyson didn't say much of anything in response to his wife's question, just entered the passcode wordlessly. There was a few precious seconds, before the screen of the laptop accepted his answer.

"So, what's next?"

Where did you and the Admiral first begin your relationship?

"â€|. " Tyson and Hannah's jaw dropped.

"Holy shit," Tarius spoke, blinking incredulously. "How did theyâ€"you know what? Fuck it, I don't even want to know."

Hannah had entered the passcode this time, saying they had met at a party on Eden Prime fifteen years ago. Once again, there was a few precious seconds, and the passcode was accepted. All modern day laptops sold to civilians had holographic projection capability (with certain military grade computers having hard light emitters), and Tyson's was no different. When the codes were accepted, the holographic projector was activated, and the last person any of the three expected to see was standing in the middle of the hotel room: Admiral Sayuri Ishigami. All three stood at attention and saluted out of instinct, even if it wasn't required as they were in civilian clothing.

"Ad-Admiral, ma'amâ€|" Hannah stuttered out in shock. She had never met the woman in person, and despite her ruthless reputation, Hannah actually admired her, from afar.

"At ease, all of you," Ishigami had told them, and they all visibly relaxed.

"Ma'am, with all due respectâ€|how are youâ€" "

"I'm not," she said bluntly. "Here, talking to you in real time.

Let's just say I am an advanced, computer program. The whereabouts of the real Ishigami is classified level 10. Seeing as what I'm going to discuss with you is more classified than even the OMEGA's operations, I don't think I have to tell you keep your mouths shut about how I'm communicating with you. Besides, don't think you got this room by accident. It's virtually impossible for anyone to bug it, so it's safe from any eavesdroppers."

"I see," Tyson replied, nodding. "So why all the secrecy? What do you need us for?"

"Ah, the million-credit question," Admiral Ishigami smiled. "The three of you should consider yourselves honored. There are very few people in the URSC that I would trust with the full details of what I'm about to propose to you and you've proven beyond a shadow-of-doubt, yourselves to have a trait that I admire: you can keep a secret. I'm still paranoid after that moron blabbed about classified information on **Byte Drain** a few years ago," she lamented, with a disgusted sigh.

Hannah allowed herself a small smile at the praise, and subconsciously stood a bit straighter. Tarius and Tyson pursed their lips, refusing to externally react.

"But, I'll get to the point," 'Ishigami' continued. "I don't need you. I need your daughter, Colonel, Rear Admiral."

All three of them immediately went on guard. Admiral or not, admired or not, that was still Hannah's only child and as such, she gave the Admiral a murderous glare that could've torn a hole in slipspace. "What the fuck do you need Alyx for?" Hannah spat venomously, clenching her fists. At the moment, Hannah's career in the URSC Navy was the last thing on her mind. She'd resign tonight if it meant her daughter stayed safe.

Ishigami didn't take it personally. "Don't worry. The choice will be hers in the end. But, to make a long story short: I want to turn your daughter, as well as other would be potential teenagers, into humanity's sword from the shadows, the SIGMA."

"SIGMA?" Tarius inquired.

"Special Intelligence Gathering and bio-Mechanically Augmented force," Ishigami explained.

"You want to turn our daughter into a super spy?" Tyson blinked. He'd be lying if he said he wasn't intrigued.

Ishigami smirked. "Yes, essentially. Not just a super spy, but they would be performing operations so classified, that only me and Director Xavier would be aware of."

"What about the N7? The OMEGA?"

"Both of which are public knowledge, which is problematic," Ishigami countered. "The SIGMA will never, EVER be made public knowledge and will only be known to their immediate family members. They can and will operate behind enemy lines for months, if not years without our direct support. They will be ghosts, phantoms that haunt our enemy's nightmares, stuff of legend. The OMEGA will perform their own

black operations to be sure, but that will mostly be in our own territory."

Hannah nodded, now understanding her logic. It would be near _impossible_ for the URSC to _plausibly_ deny any wetwork operations in Citadel Space made by the OMEGA, for reasons that should be _abundantly_ obvious. N7 operatives, _maybe_, but even they had their limits. As was shown during the battle of Khar'shan, they were matched by the veteran members of the Batarian's S.T.R.I.K.E. and were completely _dominated_—understandably so—by the Turian HUNTERS. If they were sent into Asari territory and, God forbid, encountered Commandos or Huntresses, technology advantage or not, they were simply not walking out alive without superior numbers, the element of surprise, or honest to God, _luck_.

Ishigami continued. "We see potential in your daughter, Colonel," she said with a knowing smile. "She inherited a lot of your traits." Tyson pursed his lips, again, getting the double meaning. Hannah was none the wiser. "It'll be her choice. But should she accept—we would train her to be the greatest warrior humanity will never know."

"Okay," Hannah breathed out. "So, the gist of this: you wanted to let us know that you will want us to essentially let our daughter be trained by you, augmented, then sent on operations where she officially doesn't exist to do God knows what to advance the interests of the USG government."

"Yes."

"Why do you need her now? Why not wait till she joins after she graduates high school?"

'_Truthfully I wanted children, but Miles thought that was too—extreme.' "_Under the Uniform Code of Military Justice, we can't let minors join the military without parental permission _and_ the consent of the conscript. There are particulars of the SIGMA program that need—a younger generation." Translation: it was classified, don't ask.

"—Fuck," Tarius shook his head, trying to wrap his head around this. "We're going to need some time to take all of this in."

"As I expected—"

Ishigami was cut off from Tyson's phone ringing. The caller I.D. showed it was Alyx. '_Speak of the devil_', he thought before answering. "Hey, baby girl, we were just—"

"DAD!" she screamed on the other end, clearly in distress. "They came out of nowhere and started shooting and—"

"Whoa, whoa, whoa! Slow down, who's shooting?"

"I don't know! Shane, Kolyat, and me were just playing wargames, and we met Galen, and, these men with glowing red eyes just opened fire. Everyone is dead but us, we're running—"

"Galen? Who the hell is—wait, you said red eyes?" Tyson's blood ran cold. "Did they have tattoos?" Tarius and Hannah went wide-eyed

and the Colonel made a throat cutting motion with his hands.

"Uh huh, red eyes, blue and grey uniform, they seemed to focus on us. Dad, I think they wantâ€"

"Alyx, I need you to calm down right now. Okay, baby?"

Alyx was sniffing as tears fell down her cheek. "Ye-yes sir," she stuttered out.

"Where are you now? Is Shane and Kolyat with you?"

"Uh huh. We're hiding out in a McDonald's on Sixth Avenue, downtown. They've got soldiers everywhere. They're shooting everyone in sight. Dadâ€|I'm scared. I don't know what to do."

Tyson was silent for a full five seconds. "Alyx, listen to me. Listen to me carefully. Do you remember what I've taught you these past few months?"

"Uh huh," she nodded over the phone. Tyson could hear her audibly swallow some built up saliva.

"I'm going to be honest with you. It's going to be awhile before I can get to you. These men, they're known as deLXE. They will stop at nothing to kill you to get to me and believe me when I say they WILL kill you, if you let them. So I need you to be brave and fight. I can't perform the daring last minute rescue you always see in those holovids you watch. I've taught you how to defend yourself, now it's time to put it to the test."

"Dad I can'tâ€"

"Yes, you can, dammit!" her father yelled, making her wince. "I don't just need you to fight. I need you to survive. I don't like this, believe me, but we don't have a choice. What did I always teach you?"

She breathed in and out, and nodded over the phone. "Okay, dad, I understand."

"Good. Now, I need you to get to the beachhead on the far side of the city. You'll understand why, when you get there. For now, I need you to do one thing: live."

"I will, I promise," Alyx replied resolutely.

"Okay. Stay off the phone. I don't know if deLXE has their tracking technology with them. I'll see you soon." A pause. "I love you."

"I love you too, dad." She hung up.

Tyson turned to Ishigami. "Do you know anything about this?"

Ishigami rolled her eyes. "Of course, not. I'm a computer program, not the real thing." Her eyes then softened. "Do what you have to do." The hologram vanished.

Tyson glanced at his wife, apologetically. "Hannah Iâ€"

"Don't," she stopped him. "Later. Let's go get our daughter."

Nodding, both ex-TDST soldiers pulled out their bags and opened secret compartments that held two M7 Smart Pistols, five extra magazines for reloading, and a Shield Belt. Apparently, they had smuggled the weaponsâ€|just in case.

"Who taught you how to smuggleâ€|"

"Thane and Kai Leng," Tarius answered simply. That was all that needed to be said as the two soldiers suited up for war.

Truthfully, neither TDST operative hated deLXE rebelsâ€|until now. Now, it just got personal.

* * *

><p>Downtown Angel City

McDonald's

July 25**th****, 2168 1600 hours**

"So, what'd your dad say?" Shane asked as he glanced at hisâ€|girlfriend? They were hiding out in a local McDonald's after narrowly escaping from a WarGames center in the Central Business District. Not the most elaborate or high class of places to hide, but at the very least they were aliveâ€|for now.

"He's not gonna make it in time," Alyx solemnly told him. "We have to make it to the beachhead." She glanced at Galen, who crouched down after making sure the coast was clear. "Badass ARC pilot ends up saving our lives. I can see the headlines, now," she mused.

As it turned out, Galen Antares was a frequent customer of McNeil's WarGames, being a regular ever since he was thirteen, which was the minimum age, lawfully, a citizen could participate in any war games. Shane and Alyx, had practically wet themselves, meeting the youngest ARC pilot in the Circuit's history. Of course, the gushing and praise, while appreciative, made the young prodigy a bit uncomfortable. Even still, Galen wasn't just a good pilot; he was one hell of a player. Backed with Shane's biotics, Kolyat's N7-'lite' training from his father, and Alyx being good at damn near everything, the four were able to completely decimate even the most experience players. After a fourth match lopsided in their favor, they were about to pay for a fourth game until Shane had gotten a bad vibe.

Several squads of men in strange armor had invaded the simulation arena and opened fire, killing indiscriminately. Had Galen not knew a shortcut and a lesser known emergency exitâ€|

Galen waved her off, as he glanced outside again. No hostilesâ€|yet. "It's nothing, really," he replied modestly. "Okay, any more ideas, besides waiting for Kolyat?" Kolyat had headed off to scavenge weapons, either from dead police officers or from deLXE.

"Iâ€|don't know," Shane admitted, sheepishly. "Alyx?"

"How the fuck should I know?" she retorted flippantly, then sighed.
"â€|sorry, Shane. I justâ€|"

"This whole situation is just fucked up, I know." He looked around.
"I could use a Big Mac," he joked, and she chuckled, appreciating the attempt to cheer her up. Galen smiled, noting the attraction and chemistry of his new friends.

"So, it's obvious you two have prior training," Galen noted in a non sequitur, while the two looked suddenly uncomfortable. "Don't try to bullshit me and deny it. The only reason I'm as good as I am now is because of practicing on my own. The way you three were fighting? The way you held your guns, your movements, and sense of coordination. That's not an accident." He narrowed his eyes and glanced at Shane. "Biotic, sense of balance of stealth and power, consistently caught our opponents off guard in strategic and tactical ambushes. No matter what, even between matches you always glanced at the corners, always keenly aware of your surroundings. Then, you kept getting a bad vibe after our match and you kept looking towards one of the exits, something inside you just screaming 'get out'. That's not a natural impulsion. Even trained counter surveillance soldiers take time to get that instinct. One of your parents is either active or retired militaryâ€|.SRS? Maybe. More than likely an N7 considering your skills with a sword."

Shane's mouth was slightly agape and Galen turned to Alyx. "Then there's you. Youâ€|astound me Alyx Shepard. It's abundantly obvious that whoever trained you hasn't taught you basic espionage and counter espionage skills. That being said, you're fast, strong, quick on your feet. Quite frankly, you're good at everything: long range, short range, medium range, pistols, shotguns, and rifles, it doesn't matter. You have extremely high stamina and you're constantly on the move, which means your father is almost certainly retired from the Titan Drop Shock Troopers. He also taught you basic squad leadership." He glanced between the "couple". "No teenager acquires these skills by accident. So am I right or wrong?"

"Damnâ€|" Shane grimaced. He was pretty much right on the money. "How the hell did you learn figure all that out?"

"I'm rich and have a lot of free time," Galen answered dismissively. Shane and Alyx snorted. Should've seen that coming.

"All right," Alyx spoke up, getting the two's attention. "So, here's our situation. We've basically got rebels, of all things, here, and they're trying to kill usâ€|or rather ME, specifically."

Shane's biotics flared, causing a visible crack in the countertop where the register was, splitting the machine neatly in twain. "That is NOT happening," he vowed, resolutely.

Alyx gave him a small smile, thankful of his protectiveness, but got to the matter at hand. "My dad told us to get to a beach head. Problem is, that's about 17 kilometers out andâ€|"

"We have a bunch of lunatic rebels standing in our way. Jesus Christ," Galen growled. "We need to wait for back up, we can't do this. This isâ€|is crazy! I've never killed anyoneâ€|"

"Are you kidding me?!" Shane rebuked him sharply. "Do you understand what's going on? We are in a monumentally fucked up situation right now. We're a bunch of fourteen year olds in the middle of a goddamn terrorist attack. No one is coming to rescue us! You've got enough basic skillsâ€œ"

"In a simulation, Shane! I never had to worry about dying, for God's sake! I _play_ soldier, I'm not _actually_ one. _That's_ what Wargames was built for. For people like me, who love to analyze the small details, build contraptions in their spare time, and see what war _was_ but not suffer any of the consequences. This isn't me. This never was going to be me._"_

"So are you gonna roll over and just die, like a coward? Is that it?"

"No! I am justâ€œ"

"Ugh, both of you shut up!" Alyx growled forcefully. "This is not the time for us to be fighting. We have enough problems as is andâ€œ" She stopped mid-sentence, as the back of her hairs stood up.

"Alyx? Are you all riâ€œ"

She covered Shane's mouth and motioned for them to be quiet and follow her. They did so without question. They crouched low and slowly and methodically made their way through the kitchen. Something was putting Shepard on edge and she ordered them both on her left flanks, and staked to the shadows. The further along they went, the 'louder' the bells inside her head kept blaring. Closerâ€œ|she crept. The kitchen was deathly silent, even the soft hum of the AC being drowned out by the raw anxiety coursing through them. Another stepâ€œ|.more blaring. Silence continued on. Shane crept forward, his eyes scanning the shadows. Nothing. Thenâ€œ|

'_Wait_â€œ|' Alyx looked in another cornerâ€œ|near the freezer. The door was ajar, and small breeze swirled through the room. That's when she saw it: a faint outline of active camouflage of an approaching figure. The frigid air had, for a fraction of a second, outlined the figure. Alyx didn't even hesitate before engaging. Using all of her strength, she knocked over the soldier and pinned him to the wall, his cloak deactivating instantly. With a precise strike, she used a technique that Kolyat had taught her to chop at his esophagus, her blow being strong enough to crush the deLXE scout's windpipe. Struggling to breath, and caught off guard by the surprise assault, the scout dropped his M-55 rifle. Alyx caught it long before gravity took ahold of it, and slammed the butt off it in the scouts face, sending him tumbling over. She jumped back a meter or so, aimed, and fired two shots in the cranium. In less than five seconds of discovery, the deLXE operative was now joining his brothers and sisters in death, courtesy of a Shepard. He surely wasn't going to be the last.

"...Holy fuck," Shane blinked, bringing down his biotics, clearly not seeing a need to use them.

"How did you know he was there?" Galen asked in bewilderment.

"Iâ€œ|don't know," Alyx answered him truthfully. "I justâ€œ|_knew_"

something was off. Like there was this voice in my head telling me we aren't alone, here. Kind of likeâ€|"

"Spider-Sense?" Shane joked. Alyx didn't laugh, causing him to frown.

Galen, while not understanding the reference, was having thoughts and theories of his ownâ€|privately of course. '_How the __**hell**__ did she know? He was cloaked. And she still sensed he was coming before? He didn't even __**know**__ we were here until she attacked him. He was caught completely by surprise. On top of that, she can sense cloaked soldiers coming, but acted completely oblivious when Shane was having vibes at the simulation matchâ€|is she putting up a front? No. Couldn't be. No reason, she didn't think. She doesn't have the mindset of an espionage agentâ€|what the fuck is going on here? I've only heard of stuff like this from the OMEGA and Sangheili Special Operations Groupâ€|._

Galen's thoughts were cut short as Kolyat chose to make a grand entrance, entering from the lobby with a duffel bag he hadâ€|borrowed.

"All right, sorry it took me soâ€|"holy _shit_, " he blinked seeing the corpse. He mentally made the connection, seeing as how Alyx had the rifle in her hand.

"Guy tried to sneak up on us, Alyx killed him," Galen explained, succinctly.

"I see," the drell nodded, taking the explanation for what it was. "Good news and bad news. Good news is, I got some weapons for us to use to get out of this hellhole. Bad news isâ€|not a lot of ammo to go with itâ€|and no these aren't hybrid weapons." That wasn't a surprise. Although Earth was a different story for a variety of reasons, all of the URSC's colonies had draconian gun control laws. While a civilian could own standard chemical propelled weaponry, provided they passed rigorous background checks, took several written and oral tests bi-annually, owned a license, etc. _no one_, other than the military was even allowed to, _literally_, _touch_ plasma-kinetic hybrid weaponry, and this included the Sangheili's direct energy rifles and pure plasma weaponry. Even rebel groups such as deLXE had moderate difficulty of acquiring them, which is why they stuck with the civilian model of the M-55.

"All right, we can make it work," Shane shrugged. Crouching down, he unzipped the duffel bag. There were several SMGs, two Magnum pistols, an EBR, 15 magazines, and a few tear gas grenades. Best of all though, were tactical vests, reminiscent of early 21st century earth militaries, but the protection far exceeded those vests. It was old school, and any galactic soldier would've laughed at you for wearing it in a combat zone, but when you didn't have energy shielding, _some_ protection was better than none at all. The URSC was _extremely_ stingy with its military grade technology, preferring to keep it on lockdown as much as possible.

Shane grabbed an SMG, a pistol, and ammo for both. Galen sighed, resolving himself to get over his anxiety of killing others, and grabbed the other pistol, four magazines for it. He cocked the sidearm.

"Shane, eat something, this place has plenty," Kolyat suggested, getting armed himself with the Enhanced Battle Rifle, and four spare magazines.

"Are you sure that's a good idea? I mean I don't want to fight on a full stomach."

"No one said you did. But you're a biotic. You'll need all the calories you can get," Kolyat explained. Although the dark-skinned teenager hated being ordered around, he conceded to his point and scrambled to find something to snack on.

"You okay, Alyx?" Kolyat noticed she was still staring at the deLXE scout she had killed. "I know it's rough, your first kill, you may feelâ€|"

"Guilt? No. That's just it, Kolyat...I don't feel anything." She looked at her alien "cousin" her eyes watered with tears. The drell closed the distance between them and hugged her close, being sure their rifles were pointed in a safe direction.

"It's okay, Alyx," he told her soothingly, as she cried in his chest. "My father told me that every soldier reacts to their first kill in different ways. Some break down, some don't. He was going to kill you, you killed him first, you understand that right?" She nodded. "Okay, then. I need you to be strong. I'm sure your father told you that. Can you do that for me?" He received another nod.

"Good," Kolyat turned to the rest. "Everyone ready?"

"I am," Shane affirmed, taking Alyx's hand in his, and squeezing it.

"All right, let's move out," Kolyat ordered, and the four teenagers moved out in a standard fireteam formation, just like they had done in their Wargames matches.

Except this timeâ€|the game was very, very, real.

* * *

><p>Arcturus Station

July 25**th****, 2168 **

1900 hours local time

Director Miles Xavier was exhausted. This was one of the few times out of the year that he had to deal with the leading party members of Parliament, including his own, which controlled both the Upper and Lower Chamber. Xavier's administration, or rather himself more specifically, was more-or-less "hands off" with matters dealing with politics and dealing with Senators, unless it was major legislative laws, such as making amendments to USG's Universal Health Care coverage, appointing Chief Magistrates to interpret the Unified Species Charter, Defense spending, and the like. All of the other rather trivial things he left to his Deputy Director. Although, on paper, the Deputy Director of the Unified Species Government was the second most powerful position in the USG, in reality, the DDUSG had far less influence due to the fact that, by law, he or she had a

security clearance that tapped out at level 9. As such, they weren't even allowed to sit in on meetings involving the Security Council that consisted of Xavier, the Minister of Defense, Director of the Interstellar State Department, the Chief of Naval Operations, High General of the Marines, High General of the Army, and finally the Director of the Office of Strategic Intelligence. On occasion, Admiral Lasky, Imperial Admiral Rtas Vadam, and Arbiter Thel' Vadam along with Admiral Steven Hackett were invited, but this wasn't always the case. If Xavier chose to inform the Deputy Director of certain tidbits of clandestine information, he was well within his right to do so.

Most of the time he chose not to.

However, this week was hectic, some members of Parliament were on "vacation" to see the A.R.C championship, and many headaches were followed due to what was an adult version of truancy. Personally, Xavier wasn't a fan, but different strokes for different folks.

As he walked into his rather luxurious office, Matias had already materialized on his desk, a bright smile on his face. "Hectic day, huh, sir?" The A.I. teased. Instead of looking like a U.S. Supreme Court Judge, he took the appearance of a Grand Magistrate, which was more or less like an armored warrior monk, as some Marines had put it.

"You don't know the half of it," Xavier smiled whimsically, loosening his tie and throwing off his suit jacket. Oh, how he hated semi-formal wear. "Can you believe that they're stonewalling me with funding for the ODF? They created the damn, branch for fuck's sake." Xavier was still a bit annoyed. He was arguably the most popular director in the USG's history, but politicians were still assholes at the end of the day.

"I agree, they'll never cease to amaze me," the A.I agreed wearily. "On the plus side, you did manage to convince them, sir."

Xavier sat down at his desk, tapped a few icons, and several hard light holograms appeared, with his email appearing on the glass computer monitor. "Yeah, I guess so. I still hate it though."

"Comes with the territory."

"Indeed it does." Xavier then smiled, brightly. "Where's Sayuri? Tell me she's free, right now."

"Hold on," Matias said, going through his classified databanks. "The Amaterasu is in the Perseus Veil, along with a small Prowler flotilla. She hasn't reported back in weeks."

"God, I miss her!" he muttered softly, running his hand through his hair, but Matias heard him clearly as if he was shouting it from the rooftops.

"Then! as you humans say! hit her up, sir," the A.I offered.

Xavier grunted. "You know how she gets when she's takes an entire Prowler fleet into unknown territory." Well, technically, the Perseus Veil wasn't unknown per se, but the point still stood.

"Sir, that woman always makes exceptions for you. So, cut the crap, call your woman and talk to her, and go to sleep tonight with a smile on your face." Matias had a shit-eating grin on his face. He was practically the only A.I, except for, perhaps, Cortana, who had the balls to call the Director out so directly.

Xavier laughed out loud. "Yes, sir," he humorously replied, mock saluting him. He pressed another icon on his desk and a computer synthesized voice asked. "Welcome Director Xavier. Whom are you contacting?"

"Admiral Sayuri Ishigami," he said tersely. "Access Code: Two-One-Eight-Three-Two-Five-Five-Two."

"â€|Confirmed. One moment," the voice said and his screen switched to the URSC's emblem that was slowly rotating while the system waited for Admiral Ishigami to connect the call.

"Mind us having some privacy?" Xavier politely asked the A.I

Matias snorted. "Sure, whatever, I've already seen both of you having seâ€" "

"GET OUT NOW!" Xavier roared, more so out of embarrassment, rather than genuine ire. Matias' hologram vanished instantly. He shuddered. Man, he loved his A.I. assistant like a little brother, but damn if he wasn't annoying at times.

"Matias has gotten a bit bold hasn't he?" He perked up on and glanced at his screen. There she was in all her glory: she wasn't in uniform, but a black tank top and form fitting sweat pants. Miles Andre Xavier didn't care who disagreed: in his eyes, Sayuri was the most beautiful woman in the goddamn galaxy. Ishigami then gave him a small smile, a smile reserved only for him. "It's been a minute, hasn't it Miles?"

"Too long. I've been busy dealing with the assholes in Parliament, while you get to explore the Perseus Veil. Goddamn you and your luck, Sayuri."

She smirked, "I make my own luck, Miles. You of all people should know that."

"Yeah, yeah," he replied dismissively, before getting serious. "All right, let's get this out of the way, before we get too personal. The Perseus Veilâ€|.what have you found out? Have you been to Rannoch? You haven't updated me in two weeks, which was unusual."

Sayuri was silent for several seconds, as she frowned. "Milesâ€|I don't know how to say this butâ€|" she trailed off again, as if still not believing it herself.

"â€|But?" he asked, his impatience seeping through his tone.

"Miles, it's the Geth. They'reâ€" "

"Director Xavier, you have a call on line ten!" It was over the intercom from his Secretary.

"Goddammit, hold on Sayuri. This had better be important," he growled, answering his phone. "Xavier," he spoke quickly. "What's soâ€" Xavier's eyes widened as the officer explained to him the situation. "You want to run that by one more time?!"

Sayuri frowned, clearly in the dark. She _despised_ not knowing information. It was her lifeblood. He, who controlled information, controlled the entire galaxy. She could see the rage and disbelief etch across her astute lover's face. Xavier ended the call and threw the cordless phone across the room.

"Miles, what is going on?"

"deLXE has attacked Eden Prime and the URSC Daedalus," Xavier explained, bluntly without preamble.

"They've WHAT?!" Ishigami nearly fell out of her chair. "Why on earth would they be stupid enough toâ€" she trailed off as she remembered the disc she had instructed Captain Sejanus to give to the Shepard family. "Oh, God."

"What?" Xavier asked getting his things ready.

"They're after Alyxandria! Oh, dear, God." Ishigami was practically panicking something she _rarely_ did. She was pacing back and forth.

"Colonel Greystone's daughter? Wasn't he part of Projectâ€" "

"Yes! Do you have any idea how important she is, what she's potentially capable of?!" Ishigami interjected. "If deLXE kills her or _worse_ captures her and learn _why_ she's so vital to the SIGMAâ€" | "

"All right. I'm recalling every available asset on Eden Prime on locating Shepard, ASAP. Talk to me Sayuri, how the fuck did these assholes sneak inside Utopia?"

"There's only one way. We have a mole," she gritted her teeth. Whoever that mole was, was officially a dead man walking.

"I figured as much," Xavier frowned. "Okay, your report about the Perseus Veil and the Geth can wait. I need you to get your ass back here, ASAP."

"Aye, sir," she replied professionally, disconnecting the link.

"Matias, send word out to the Security Council, we're having an emergency meeting," he ordered, and the A.I. complied wordlessly. Xavier retied his necktie and practically sprinted out the door.

* * *

><p>URSC Daedalus

July 25**th****, 2168 **

"Keep the bastards off our left flank!" yelled Major Nicholas "St. Nick" Sanchez, of the 1st Division Special Reconnaissance Service or

SRS. Sanchez was a damn good soldier, it came with the territory of being in the Marines' prestigious Special Operations Recon Unit, but he was far from being as good as an N7, let alone an OMEGA. He had only twelve other guys under his command, but while they had quality, just the sheer numbers of deLXE troops pouring into the hangar bay was overwhelming them. They had been caught with their goddamn pants down.

"How the hell did they get through?!"

"Don't give a shit, just keep firing!" Sanchez ordered over the gunfire. He took cover as his shields had been breached and he was running low on ammo. Using training honed from muscle memory, Sanchez ejected the spent magazine of his Direct Marksman Rifle, loaded a fresh one and chambered a round. Two shots from the DMR resulted in an instant kill. That's one thing he was thankful for: deLXE still hadn't managed to crack the URSC's energy shielding technology, which was a closely guarded secret. But even then, no matter how many his men seem to kill, it seemed as if the rebels just kept coming. Sanchez had to give them some credit. For them to pull this off was a serious step up in their capability, and a Marine always gave his enemy the respect they deservedâ€|before putting a bullet between their eyes.

"Fall back! Use smokes!" Sanchez ordered, as it was clear they couldn't hold this relatively small hangar bay forever. It wasn't worth it. It was, unfortunately for the crew chiefs that worked here, of little strategic value. They had few men, and they needed to regroup. True to his order, every single SRS Marine popped smokes, and to go along with it, a several hard light cover grenades to cover their retreat. Sanchez and the others sprinted from the hangar and sealed the doors tight behind them, hoping that would slow them down.

"Son of a bitch," a drell Marine grimaced, as they had a chance to catch their breaths. "deLXEâ€|attacking the _Daedalus_. Fuck me."

"Right? This is bullshit. I was just a day away from getting some shore leave, but no, I had to be the good Marine and stay aboard," another complained.

"Marines!" Sanchez. "Did I give you permission to bitch?!"

"No, sir," they all responded doleful.

"**ATTENTION: ALL FIRETEAMS ARE TO PROTECT ENGINEERING. FIRETEAMS Grizzly, Scarecrow, and Oxtail ARE NOW DEPLOYED IMMEDIATELY"
**

"Let's move! I don't want a single one of these fascist assholes come so much as one hundred feet within the Daedalus' engines!"

"Sir!"

* * *

><p>Julius was the first to react to the threat. Having being personally trained by the Master Chief, exclusively, he reacted, as any leader would've: he accessed the threat, gave out his orders, and

they obeyed accordingly.<p>

"Sam! Take Lark and Mike and head to the bridge! We'll handle things here!" Julius ordered, referring to Anya, Alastor, and himself of course. Sam didn't question his orders, and fell back to an exit.

"Okay, time to cut loose," He smirked. "Alastor?"

Alastor didn't even need to be told twice, as he initiated a biotic charge and collided with the nearest deLXE operative, whose armor and bones were shattered instantly. The OMEGA biotic didn't stop there, as he dodged a pitiful melee attack, grabbed the would be attacker's arms in a vice like grip and snapped the rebels wrist with ease and then followed up with a devastating kick that shattered his ribcage.

The biotic wasn't the only one taking his pound of flesh. Anya, once again, with the skill taught to her by Linda, sniped two deLXE soldiers so quickly that Julius literally couldn't tell which one she killed first. Julius himself leapt off the first floor and executed a ground pound, crushing one of the rebels and wounding several others in the process. He drew his MA6A and opened fire, the plasma-kinetic weaponry tearing through the rebels' armor just as easily as it did the Batarians. Rather than go down, quite as easily, they had seemed to get their act together and concentrated fire on Julius, forcing him into cover.

Instinctively, Al took over, seeing his leader had a need to recharge his shields, and sent out a devastating warp towards the fascists. Most had enough experience to dodge the attack, to their credit, but those who were caught in the biotic attack were torn apart at the molecular level, and crushed by the mini-black hole. Four unlucky souls who had dodged, heads exploded as Anya picked them off, one by one, in coordinated fashion, the moment the opportunity presented itself courtesy of the S-99 Hybrid Sniper Rifle. Before she could reload and add more to her kill streak, Julius mowed the rest down with concentrated fire from the MA6A, expending all 64 rounds in a sweeping motion.

"Status report!" he barked out.

"Green," both Anya and Alastor acknowledged.

"Let's move," he ordered and the three-man team took off. While sprinting, Julius didn't stop to reload and did so on the fly.

"Anya, see if you can raise anyone on the Battle Grid!" he ordered the sniper as the trio was nearing a full-blown sprint.

Anya reloaded her sniper rifle, magnetically attached the weapon to her back, and interfaced with her built-in holographic communications interface on her left forearm, without breaking stride.

"This is Master Sergeant Anya of the OMEGA forces, does anyone on the Battle Grid copy?"

"This Major Nicholas Sanchez, 1st division SRS! Where are we needed OMEGA?" Sanchez answered immediately. Julius smiled, so the bastards

weren't able to crack the Battle Grid, eh? That was good news. That would've been a goddamn disaster, even when they kicked these bastards off the Daedalus. It was a shame that only infantry soldiers had access to it, which explained why the Commander didn't answer on the bridge, but alas, he had to work with the hand with he was dealt.

"Major Sanchez, good to hear from you," Julius answered, as he ruthlessly cut down the moderate resistance of deLXE soldiers in their pathway. Anya had switched to a submachine gun, instead of her sniper rifle. "Major, I need you and your men to head to the weapons bay twenty and protectâ€"

"Sir, with all due respect, shouldn't we be defending the engine and server room?"

"Major, I've already have diverted OMEGA and DRAGMA forces to both areas. We're low on numbers here. If deLXE gets its hands on a Hyperion nuke, and manage to escape Utopia with it, hundreds of millions of lives will be in danger. If we have to scuttle this whole fucking ship to prevent that from happening, then by the grace of God, we're going to do it!" The cost of this attack alone was going to shake the public's confidence in the USG government, if deLXE managed to steal a nuke and, God forbid, used it on a civilian populated area, then the tens of trillions of credits spent constructing the Daedalus was trivial compared to the long term fallout, both literal and figuratively.

"Understood sir," Sanchez acknowledged. "Heading that way, now."

"Good, keep me posted." He then instructed Anya to cut the feed, which she did so.

"Sam, you there?"

"I read you loud and clear, sir," Sam replied immediately. "Bridge is secure. We're holding down the fort along with Security Forces Personnel. We also have the heavy deck guns programmed to destroy any ship that gets within 100 kilometers of the Daedalus until we give the all clear." Of course didn't mention that they had already warned the rest of the Utopia Fleet to stay clear. Why would he? It was an obvious assumption that Julius would make himself.

Julius smiled. He couldn't have asked for a better XO. "Goddamn, Sam. I could kiss you right, now."

"Make sure you put on chapstick, first," Sam quipped, chuckling.

"â€|dammit," Julius shook his head, before unceremoniously cutting the link. Anya

"Sir, I don't think he's EVER gonna let you live that down," Alastor said, while snickering himself. Anya didn't even try to hide her laughter.

"Yeah, yeah," he admitted. "I suppose he won't." He then turned serious. "Let's kick these bastards off our ship."

"Couldn't agree with you more, sir."

* * *

><p>Turian Station, "NOVA-6"

HUNTER Base of Operations

**System Unknown, Time Unknown **

"Very well, Admiral, keep me posted," General Oraka nodded as he closed the communications link with an asari admiral who was essential to his long term plans. Everything was coming together quite nicely, it seemed. The general was just about to retire to his quarters before his doors unceremoniously slid apart, revealing Colonel Valos Ragnoros, barging in, hurriedly.

"Colonel! What is the meaning of this?"

"A thousand apologies, sir, but this was urgent!" The Turian officer didn't waste any time and he opened his omni-tool. On General Oraka's desk, was a hologram of a news feed, that was only, at best, a few hours old.

The General blinked. "Is that-?"

"Yes, sir," Ragnoros nodded. "A URSC colony. They refer to it as 'Eden Prime'," Ragnoros explained. "They are under attack by a rebellion group known as deLXE. Most of our intel about the organization comes from the human extranet. Which is relatively little. We did a comparison of other human-led rebellions and we've concluded the Office of Strategic Intelligence's "their intelligence agency" has little intelligence on them. Less so than we do."

Septimus leaned forward, Valos having his full attention.

"I'll get to the point, sir and be blunt: our agent within the Blood Pack was terminated. He managed to obtain some highly critical classified information."

General Oraka narrowed his eyes very dangerously. "Go on."

"We have reason to believe this human rebel group, deLXE, is about to join forces with some of the Terminus Systems most notorious gangs, Blood Pack at the top of the list."

His eyes widened. "What?! Already?!" These humans had barely been introduced to the wider galaxy for two months! "Why would they?" General Oraka stopped himself from asking such a stupid question. deLXE might have access to technology that the other gangs would want, even if it was stolen, outdated by URSC standards, obsolete, etc. This was an enormous business opportunity.

"Do the humans know about this?"

Ragnoros shook his head. "Extremely unlikely, as of right now. The only reason we know now is because our spy had the fortune of being a sentry while some of our alien allies were talking about the details, privately."

"Idiots," Oraka shook his head. Of course he didn't expect gangs to operate with military discipline, but that was a rookie mistake.

"Indeed. That's not all, deLXE plans on moving to another base of operations to coincide with the Blood Pack and other gangs."

"Where?"

"Torfan."

"Of course," General Oraka shook his head. Torfan may have been a small moon, but there were literally tens of thousands of mercenaries, pirates, criminals, ex-Special Forces, etc, among the moon. The Council hadn't bothered to do much about it for one reason or another. '_Spineless cowards,'_ Septimus thought in pure disgust.

"Do we inform the humans, sir?"

"Of course not!" he snapped. "We're going to keep this intel on a need-to-know basis. We're going to let this play out and let deLXE set up shop, as I've heard the humans use the term."

Ragnoros blinked, clearly not expecting this.

"Wake Saren and the rest of the HUNTERS and to tell them to make preparations. ALL of them."

"All of them? For what?"

General Oraka gave him a smirk. "A HUNTER siege."

(END)

And there it is! This chapter was originally going to be one chapter, but due to time constraints, I decided to split it into two chapters, because I didn't want it to be overtly long and drawn out.

I'm still looking for OCs that is an investigative reporter from the Citadel. Yes, I'm still accepting SIGMA applications, as well! Get creative, but don't be ridiculous!

Codex:

****Byte Drain****- Byte Drain is the number one social Netsite in the URSC specializing exclusively in uploading and sharing videos. Managed by Asunder Industries, and due to the intuitive user interface and ability of users to upload and share an unlimited videos, Byte Drain has nearly 2,000,000 hours of video uploaded every minute.

****Shield Belt****-Used by the N7 forces going in deep undercover. A shield belt takes the appearance of regular belt, but is able to generate a low powered energy shield around the user, which can take a few sustain hits before the user must take cover and allow it to recharge.

****Special Reconnaissance Service****- Also known as the SRS, the Special Reconnaissance Service is a Special Forces unit of the URSC Marine Corps and a 2nd Echelon force overall in the URSC's SOCOM classification standards. The SRS is a relatively small elite force of highly trained URSC Marines who provide forward intelligence on enemy forces as well as being pathfinders. Along with deep cover recon abilities, SRS has been known to conduct direct action operations against rebel strongholds, and were instrumental in the invasion of Khar'shan.

****Battle Grid****- The Battle Grid, nicknamed the "Grid" by URSC military members, is a gestalt extranet system that covers the entirety of URSC space as well as its forward deployed locations, comparable to the Covenant Battle Net. The War Net is created by the combined efforts of specialized computer systems, A.I, and sapient technicians, linked into one network. By using computers, the Grid roughly can grow to any capacity, and grow sufficient enough to sustain itself over time without losing any processing power. The Grid transmits every element of data gathered by all sensors within the net and then deploys it to all forces fighting in the theater simultaneously, while concurrently recording that information as well. Through the Battle Grid, even a private fresh out of basic training, can observe satellite reconnaissance, UAV reconnaissance, RADAR, motion detectors, SONAR, heart beats, sniper detectors, magnetic anomalies, among others to visually track enemy forces in real time, projected either on their HUD or on smart watch, whichever the personal preference of the operator. The Grid extends to the Navy, the Grid will track enemy fighter deployments, warship formations, FTL coordinates, and anything else needed for Commanders to make the best tactical decisions in the heat of the moment. The BattleGrid is compartmentalized, obviously, and black operations by Special Forces will not show up on the grid, without the proper clearance, and a person with a neural implant can only access the Grid, along with other draconian security measures to ensure the system is never compromised.

That's all folks!

End
file.